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(In)

SARGEN

TEACHING THE YOUNG ROBINS.

Page 14

IN THE WOODS.

4/9/20

A Book for the Young.

BY

66

M. K. M.,

AUTHOR OF THE BIRDS WE SEE,' WITH THE BIRDS,"

66 NATURAL HISTORY OF THE Bible,”

ETC.

WITH 34 ILLUSTRATIONS BY GIACOMELLI.

“If thou art worn and hard beset

With sorrows that thou wouldst forget,

If thou wouldst read a lesson that will keep Thy heart from fainting and thy
soul from sleep, Go to the woods!.... No tears

Dim the sweet look that Nature wears.”

LONGFELLOW.

London:

THOMAS NELSON AND SONS, PATERNOSTER ROW.

EDINBURGH; AND NEW YORK.

1879.

M.M.B.

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I.

Envitation.

COME to the woods, my little ones,
So shadowy and sweet,
Where scarcely sinks the moss-turf down
Under your bounding feet.
Come for the primrose in the spring,
And violet's dark blue eyes;
For the starry wood-anemones,
Which o'er the dead leaves rise.
Perchance ye hear your elders speak
Of gold, and gold's delight;
But fairer spreads the treasure-house
Of Nature to your sight.
And through the strife of onward life,
Deep in your breasts shall stay
The memory of the woods,-a joy
That shall not fade away.

Come likewise, ye of older growth,

In your fresh morning hour;

Bright dreams the woods shall bring to you Within their charmed bower.

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INVITATION.

From opening glade and forest shade

Some fairy lore will start,

And the whispering of the leaves will tell Sweet secrets to your heart.

Come to the woods, ye care-worn ones;

The cares will never follow:

Only the sun to bathe in light

The fern leaves in the hollow.

Lie down to rest upon their breast

With happy birds to sing,

And all the world's perplexities

Will seem a far-off thing.

Ye sought the woods in earlier years,

Amidst your childish play;

Your child's heart shall come back again

Beneath the boughs to-day.

While, like a grand old Gothic aisle

Up springing from the sod,

You find a forest-temple here—

The temple of your God.

And when to life's rough way once more

Ye turn your footsteps back,

Ye'll bear a few sweet drops of dew

To fling upon its track.

Ye cannot choose but teach afresh

The lessons of the glen;

And Nature's balm shall soothe and calm,

Through you, your fellow-men!

7

II.

The Robin in Winter.

“A HAPPY New Year

to you!” says the chorus of merry voices.

round the fire, as you come down to breakfast on the 1st of January, cold and snowy outside, but so warm with love and sunshine within.

“A happy New Year!” says the chime of

joyous bells from the belfry, swelling out on the frosty air and dying away, then coming -

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THE ROBIN IN WINTER.

back again, as if it would fain impress the greeting on your heart.

And “A happy New Year!” sings the Robin Red-breast in his cheeriest tones just outside the window.

He has been picking up his meal of crumbs, and now he flies up to the holly bush, and thanks you for them as energetically as if it were midsummer : for it must be very cold indeed to put the robin out of spirits.

Perhaps the robin’s welcome is the best of all ; not because he is such an old friend—and old friends’ greetings are always the pleasantest-but because he is just telling out his own experience.

It is as though he were saying what good things came to him last year without his seeking them.

So he expects them again this year, and he quite believes it will be the same with you.

“Last New-Year’s Day”-this is what he seems to sing “was so snowy I could not tell a bit what I and my dear mate should do; but then, somehow, it seemed as if some friend were always sending the right thing at the right time. When the berries were gone, we found crumbs; and if there were no crumbs, well, the snow would melt, and then there would be some worms. And spring did come at last, and we made a comfortable nest and enjoyed our little family; and the summer was THE ROBIN IN WINTER.

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so delightful; and here am I, alive and well to-day, trying to pour out my happiness, and wanting everybody else to be happy too.”

Let us fill up a few details of the robin’s daily life in summer as well as winter time. We do not know so much of him when the leaves are green as when the snow is on the ground; but still, on the whole, the robin is more sociable and familiar with us than any other bird. True, we see as much of the sparrows; but they only live amongst us for the sake of what they can get.

the robins. They could do as

We dig the soil, indeed, and so

worms, perhaps; but that is all.

It is not so with

well without us.

help them to the

They seem to care

for us for ourselves. We cannot help feeling that they have a real, disinterested love for us; and as love begets love, we certainly possess an equal regard for them.

People who never notice other birds will spare a glance for the robin. And it is the same in other Every European language has a pet

countries.

name for him; and, as the poet tells us,-

“By some name or other

All men who know him call him brother.”

When the spring comes, and the general pairing time begins, we must suppose the robin and his 14

THE ROBIN IN WINTER.

F

mate renew their vows of affection, or perhaps that is not needed. He sings to her his old song, to tell her he loves her still, and then together they set about their nest. It is made of dead leaves, and is rather untidy-looking; but they take care to make it comfortable inside with hair and feathers. It is placed almost anywhere,—in a bank or rubbish heap, in the ivy, in a bit of mossy rock-work, in a piece of matting thrown over a pump, in a broken flower-pot on the greenhouse shelf,—any snug corner will do so long as it is near the house and within reach of the ground. This confidence is not misplaced as regards ourselves, for we believe few people are hard-hearted enough to touch a robin’s nest. But our cats have no such scruples, and many a helpless little family is pounced upon by their cruel claws.

The plaintive note uttered by the parents while their little ones are thus torn from them is very piteous to hear.

It is a pretty sight to see the young brood when they first come abroad,—five or six little speckled creatures; for they do not get their red breasts for some months. The old birds watch them, and feed them, and teach them how to use their wings, till at last they are able to provide for themselves.

Then the father and mother birds retire to the woods for a time, and are less often seen; and amid

THE ROBIN IN WINTER.

15

the delights of summer your winter friends almost pass from your remembrance.

But it is not for long.

Before the first leaf has

turned yellow they are back again in your shrubbery; and ere you have realized that it is autumn, ere the fruit ripens in the garden, or the thistle-down floats past you on the breeze, you hear the robin's song again, softer and sweeter, it would seem, even than when you heard it last in the spring time. There is no other song which harmonizes so well with the calmness and repose of the declining year.

Weeks pass on, and the flowers fade, and the leaves fall, and winter reigns once more upon the earth. We look in vain for the birds of summer; they have flown away to other lands; they care for us only in the sunshine; and they leave us now to the dreariness of fog and frost. The woods are bare and uninviting, and we can stay in them no longer. But round our homes and our firesides the dreariness departs; there is warmth within, and there is the robin without. He sits upon the wintry bough and tells us not to be downhearted; that it cannot be always spring; a little patience, and the brightness in the world without will all come back again.

His own excellent condition and general aspect 16

THE ROBIN IN WINTER.

bear out his song; and as we listen, we fancy we can trace, in the beginning, middle, and ending of it, these three component parts-namely, thankful-ness for the past, contentment in the present, and a calm trust in the robin's unseen Friend for the future.

F

III.

The Woods in Spring.

HAVE you ever studied the buds?

Not

A

buds in general, but buds in particular.

friend of Wordsworth once remarked to him that he believed he was writing a poem

on a daisy. The poet corrected him, and

said it was not on a daisy, but on the

daisy.

That made all the difference; and just in the same way, we do not now speak of the budding trees, which everybody is supposed to admire, but rather of the individual bud in all its individual interest and beauty.

The anemones are drooping; the first freshness of (617)

THE WOODS IN SPRING.

the early primroses is over; and though the azure carpet of bluebells is lovely to look upon, let us lift our eyes from it and fix them for a few minutes on the branches covered with buds which bend over it.

A few minutes? Nay, we believe the variety is so great that spring will have merged into summer, and the buds into full-grown leaves, before we shall get through the wood, and come out on the other side.

Look at this elm tree near us; or, rather, carry your eye up, and say if you ever saw anything of the kind so beautiful as the way in which the pale green buds stand out against the blue April sky which peeps through them. At other seasons the elm is rather commonplace in its character; its full summer foliage is somewhat dull and uniform, and its autumn tints are pale and sickly; but at this sweet spring-time there is not a tree to compare with it. Its stately form is seen to best advantage, the tracery of the branches is clothed but not concealed, and the delicious harmony of the colouring might well delight the heart of either painter or poet.

But still we wish to pass on from the beauty of general effect to the beauty of detail, and to the interesting way in which every tree, while fulfilling the same function of nature, does it in its own special THE WOODS IN SPRING.

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manner. The work is one for all that, and the fact is a beautiful parable full of moral analogies,—only to each one is committed a different way of doing it.

Here is the chestnut; its buds have been carefully folded up in brown clammy scales all through the winter, and not a drop of rain or a twinge of frost has ever got through to hurt the life within.

For the last two or three weeks they have been getting larger and larger, till now the scales have burst; and the long divided leaves hang down like weary hands which have done their work, instead of just beginning it. But a few days of air and sunshine will put them all right, and they will spread out in broad palms, strong and vigorous, and equal to all the duty which lies before them for the summer.

Then there is a willow with its buds covered over with a kind of wool, and that has kept out the cold just as well. But the tender life has out-grown its need of blankets, and so the fragments all lie scattered underneath the trees. Ah! Nature has had an eye to the birds in this matter, and the woolly scraps will be woven into many a nest ere long.

Next to it is a beech tree; and these buds are perhaps the most elegant of all. First appears a slender pink sheath, out of which gradually emerge, 20

THE WOODS IN SPRING.

as the sheath unfolds, some soft, silky hairs.

Presently these develop into green leaves of the finest texture, and with the loveliest of fringes to edge them round. For a long time the pink sheath which has been its cradle remains clinging to the leaf-stalk, as if it were loath to leave the nursling it had sheltered; and the contrast of the colours cannot fail to strike even the most careless observer.

The sycamore buds close by have also a pink shade to their scales: and though they are larger and thicker, and the young leaves neither fringed nor feathery, yet have they their own special beauty nevertheless; for the stalks are red, and this gives another element of brightness. Some of the sycamore flowers are unfolded, and as the long yellowish spikes are full of honey, they are much frequented by the insects. And where the insects come the birds are sure to follow; so the buds have led us to the birds, and what could be more fitting for the woods?

””

Look at that tiny creature flitting about, now on this branch, now on that. If it were calling, Chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff,” it most likely would be on the very topmost twig; but this is meal-time, and by the way in which the little chiff-chaff chases the insects, or dives down into the honey-cup, we may guess it is hungry. Just above is another edition THE WOODS IN SPRING.

21

we saw them last.

of the chiff-chaff, only larger, brighter in colour, and as sweet a little bird as you could see anywhere in the world. This is the willow-warbler, having the same hunt after gnats and flies. Both of these have only just returned to us, and oh! what miles and miles have these tender wings traversed since Here comes a tomtit, with its

blue head and bright yellow breast; a mere scrap of a bird, too, but with plenty of spirit; not shy and gentle like the others, but bold and independent, digging its sharp beak into the buds, and determined to get a dinner somehow. Now the tomtit is on the branch, now underneath it; it is quite indifferent to attitude and position. You cannot help watching its antics and its nimble ways, till another friend suddenly appears—a bird not often seen, as it is of retiring disposition, and keeps generally to the inside of the hedge. But it begins a kind of hurried chatter, and we are sure by that it is the lesser whitethroat. We have often heard the same note in the thicket, and tried in vain to find out from whence it came; so now we may feel much obliged to the sycamore flowers for having lured the little whitethroat from its hiding-place, and given us a sight of a breast of snow and a crested head, and an assurance that its existence is a reality, and not a myth.

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THE WOODS IN SPRING.

And we may feel indebted to the buds, too, that they are buds, and not leaves to hide the birds from our gaze.

There is no time so favourable as

this for studying the ways and habits of these interesting creatures. So the buds and the birds are linked together by one creative hand, and “the hand that made them is Divine.”

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IV.

Going and Coming.

THEY are gone!-did they see us sweeping

The withered leaves away?

Did they watch the crimson creeping

O'er the forest day by day?

Did they wait till the corn was harboured Upon the garner floor;

And the last red apple garnered

Safe in the winter store?

But who made them the right time know ?——Swallows, swallows, who bade you go?

24

GOING AND COMING.

Did they cross the mountains, minding

Nor snow nor shadow there?

Did they thread the valleys, winding

Amongst them green and fair?

Did they pause upon the billow

With its foaming, sparkling crown,

And take it for a pillow

When twilight shades came down?

But how knew ye-oh! tell me pray,—

Swallows, swallows, which was the way?

They are come!—with spring returning :

At night they were not near;

We rise up in the morning,

And, lo, the birds are here!

The southern sky was o'er them,

The orange grove below;

But England was before them,

And on their wings must go.
Faithful and true, over sea and shore,
Swallows, swallows, ye've come once more!
O birds, which weary never
Through longest summer day,
Speak, speak to us whenever
We faint upon our way.
Tell us that He who leadeth
Your flight with loving plan,
Will give whate'er he needeth
To every child of man;
And teach us, teach us the lesson true,
Swallows, swallows, to trust like you!

V.

The House-top outside the
Woods.
To sit alone upon the house-top
is not the fashion of the English
sparrow. On the contrary, the

sparrow loves company, and excitement

too, if we may judge by the large assemblies which are often held by his community.

Every now and then it would seem

THE HOUSE-TOP OUTSIDE THE WOODS.

as if all the sparrows of the neighbourhood were gathered together-from the roof, from the water-pipes, from all the crevices and corners where they hide-for some special purpose best known to themselves.

No doubt they have a name for these social gatherings, but among human beings they are known by the name of sparrow broils. They are characterized by incessant chattering, and by strange antics. Those who have watched the proceeding say that a female sparrow is always at the bottom of it, one of these generally sitting a little way apart, but evidently exercising some mysterious influence upon the others, for when she retires the meeting breaks up.

all our learning, we have not yet found out all there is to know about these daily companions of our lives. So familiar as they are to all of us, so much beneath the notice of most of us, yet living their own life and occupying their own world in a manner utterly unintelligible to us!

With

We think contemptuously of them. "Only a

sparrow," is the constant remark; and people do not take the trouble even to use their eyes upon them.

We doubt if many know how very different are the cock and the hen birds; the former having a black mark on the breast, and also black on the head; while the dress of the female is plain brown, with-
THE HOUSE-TOP
OUTSIDE THE WOODS.

out any relief or adornment.

A town sparrow is

certainly not attractive, because all the little colour there might be is begrimed with dirt and smoke.

It is said that when the corn is ripe the London sparrows all take an annual holiday and go off to the country. One would like to believe that they did get a breath of fresh air once a year.

The

Parliament at St. Stephens is “up” at that time-why should not the sparrow assemblies break up too? Why should the country cousins have all the feast to themselves?

But there is no occasion to pity the sparrows for that which is their own choice; they do not sigh for the green lanes, else their wings would soon bear them thither. If you find them in the woods, it is where there are habitations near. The company of man is a necessity to them, or rather they appreciate highly all the good things which man brings with him. The pease and beans in the garden, and the gooseberries and the currants, as well as the scraps thrown out from the kitchen, are all equally enjoyed by them; for the sparrow has an omnivorous appetite, and will eat anything that is put on the table before him.

His manners are not in his favour; and perhaps it is this more than his plain dress which prevents his being a favourite. He is apt to be greedy and 28

THE HOUSE-TOP OUTSIDE THE WOODS.

to snatch the best; and he has a general appearance of impudence and self-consequence, which is not attractive. Yet withal the poor sparrow has many good qualities, of which it becomes us to speak.

Has a family of little birds been taken from their warm nest and put in a cage outside the window ?

the sparrow will be the first to come and feed them.

They may not be of his own race; it is enough that they are opening their mouths for food, and he will do his best to supply them. There have been many instances in which sparrows have done a deed of kindness like this, and have fed the needy ones day after day till they were able to provide for themselves.

Nor is the sparrow a stupid bird; he has many canny ways of his own. We suspect he builds his nest in the pipes that they may be safe from intrusion; and when some high tree is chosen instead, the nest is often placed under that of some larger bird, as if to bespeak protection. A taste for music is likewise possessed by the sparrow, and though without any song of his own, he will readily learn the note of the linnet or canary when brought into contact with them.

But the great usefulness of sparrows to man is the point most decidedly in their favour.

It is now

generally acknowledged that they play an important THE HOUSE-TOP
OUTSIDE THE WOODS.

part in the economy of nature. In some countries people have taken pains to get rid of all the sparrows, and have afterwards been too thankful to fetch them back at any price. For they have found that the insects are worse foes than the birds. Alas for the crop left to the undisturbed dominion of the caterpillar! It is estimated that one pair of sparrows will destroy four thousand grubs and caterpillars a week while they are feeding their young; and as they have three broods in the season, we may form some idea of the vast army of these destructive creatures, which, like Bishop Hatto's rats, would surely march upon us and devour us if the sparrows did not come to our rescue. So we may well put the sparrow on a pedestal as a public benefactor; and we may even get up a feeling of gratitude towards him as we watch him doing for us the work we could not possibly do for ourselves.

Often now are whole families of sparrows taken across the sea, to perform the same good deeds in other lands. Wherever there are no small birds to keep down the insects, there the crops fail to reach the garner. Many a humble sparrow is now wafted to Australia and to North America, and changes the English house-top for a strange new world and an unlooked-for destiny. We are glad to think that the once despised sparrow is at last recognized and 30

THE HOUSE-TOP OUTSIDE THE WOODS.

honoured; and we can fancy how the strangers are welcomed by our colonists abroad-fêted and enter-tained, no doubt, as strangers from the mother-country should be!

A company of sparrows had been taken to America not long since, but were lost to sight after their arrival there. What had become of them? It was some vexation to lose the freight after having taken so much trouble in the passage. But ere long came tidings that a lonely immigrant on the shores of Lake Ontario had been cheered by the sight of a sparrow-flock, bringing the remembrance of his far-off English home with them, waking up happy

reminis-cences, and causing utter surprise as to whence they came and whither they were going.

We think it another “feather” in the sparrow’s “cap” that he should thus be the means of rousing a sentiment, and, commonplace as he is, of impart-ing comfort. An undesigned coincidence on his part, no doubt, yet not without design for all that.

VI.

Nest-Builders in the

Woods.

“THAT Thou givest them they

gather.” This is not only true

respecting food, but also respecting the materials which

each bird selects for its nest.

Moss for the goldfinch and the

NEST-BUILDERS IN THE WOODS.

chaffinch, dead leaves for the robin, sticks for the rook, mud for the swallow; horse-hair for the lining, feathers to make a soft bed for the little ones, spiders' webs to hang for tapestry;-these, and much more than these are "given," and the little birds go forth and "gather."

Everything is made useful little bits of wool left on the thorn-bushes as the sheep passed through them; odds and ends of worsted which ladies have let fall while sitting in the garden with their work; shreds of cloth cut off by the gardener when he nailed up the fruit-trees; morsels of silk or cotton thrown out of the window as worthless, are each and all seized upon and appropriated in the building season by the ever watchful birds. They have an eye for everything; and nothing is refused which can fit into a corner or hold the structure better together. Perhaps other working ones might take a lesson, and learn that the most unlikely things may be pressed into the service and made to help forward the task they have in hand.

Amongst the nests of our English birds, there are none more beautiful than those of the finch tribe.

The chaffinch builds a perfect little house, round and soft and mossy, sometimes welded together like a piece of felt, at other times studded all over with

NEST-BUILDERS IN THE WOODS.

lichens and spiders' webs, according to the situation in which it is placed. The cunning builder adjusts the materials to the spot which the nest is to occupy, so that it may be less likely to catch the eye of the passer-by. It is very fond of building in the fork of a fruit tree; and there it is so closely covered with the same gray lichens which grow upon the stem, that you can hardly discern the nest even when you know it to be there.

The goldfinch makes the same kind of nest as the chaffinch, only that it is smaller, and, if possible, more perfect still. But it is much less common, and so to enjoy it is a much less frequent pleasure.

Only take the trouble to look for a chaffinch's nest in your garden, and you are almost sure to find one in the proper season.

Our kingfisher has a way of his own in the matter of nest-building, a way fitting in with his own manner of life. An economical way too, for having first eaten the fish, he proceeds to use up the bones! The bird first selects a hole in a bank, and then sets to work to line it with fish-bones; which he does so deftly and compactly, that the whole can be taken out altogether like a ball. There is no lack of material, for the kingfisher has a large appetite, and the fragments of his repast are always lying within his reach. The nest is not easy to (617)

NEST-BUILDERS IN THE WOODS.

find, but when found it is a curiosity which would well repay any lover of nature.

Almost on the door-step of the kingfisher's house is another structure as interesting and more elegant.

The sedge-warbler has chosen this very spot in the river because there are some tall reeds growing in the shallow water, and on one or two of these not far from the shore the nest of which we are speaking is suspended. It is made of dried grass, and securely fastened to the long stalks of the reeds; so that as the reeds bend in the breeze the nest bends with them, yet without harm. Plenty of lullaby must the little ones get as they rock about in their airy cradle; but there is no danger, for that has been anticipated. The nest is made like a very deep cup-so deep that there is no chance of their falling out; they lie snugly at the bottom, and however the wind may blow it makes no difference to them.

The tiny golden-crested wren would be offended in his small way if we did not refer to his artistic power, which may well compete with any that have gone before.

No house or home of bird could be

more fairy-like: placed not on the bough, but underneath the bough, and generally at the very extremity, it resembles in some degree the beautiful nest of the long-tailed titmouse, only that it is round, and not cone-shaped, and of course proper-NEST-BUILDERS IN THE WOODS.

tioned to the size of the diminutive creature that constructs it. The little gold crest is not four inches long, yet is a skilful workman; and the nest is a model of proportion, let every one testify who has seen it hanging half concealed from the branch of the fir-tree or deodara,

Our old friend jenny wren is not bad at building, and she too makes a hole at the side for entrance.

She puts her nest in a hay-rick, or in an out-house, or in any other snug corner which promises to be comfortable; but she does not object to the woods, if she can find a mossy trunk or a bramble bush.

There, where the long prickly sprays have flung themselves across the bluebells in a kind of arch—there, at the very top of it, about three feet from the ground—behold the domicile, with five or six transparent eggs within, and jenny wren herself perched on the brown budding branch of the oak tree which hangs over. You may take one loving look, and then leave her and her house in peace.

It is believed that with all birds it is the female which chooses the site for the nest, and then that both she and her mate labour together to construct it. Cannot we fancy the politeness with which the gentleman stands aside while the lady decides the important matter which he has left to her superior judgment? Then how he takes upon himself the 36

NEST-BUILDERS IN THE WOODS.

work of providing for her while she is sitting on her eggs, and how he lightens her labours by his most beguiling songs? Why should there not be a little romance in the life of a chaffinch or a wren as well as in ours? We can only end where we began, in wonder and amazement at the artistic power and the untiring energy of these small arti-ficers.

The beasts of the field need only a spot to lie down upon—at most, a natural cave for which they have not laboured, or a burrow such as is scooped out by the rabbit or the fox. The birds of the air —smaller, less intelligent, less gifted in other things -they are the nest-builders. God has given to them, as he did to Aholiab of old, “the spirit of cunning workmanship:” first he imparts to them the skill; then scatters before them the materials on which to use it; adds to it industry, perseverance, patience; and the result is that thing of beauty to be admired and left alone—a bird’s nest !

VII.

The Long-tailed Titmouse

and Nest.

THE little birds who can fashion such

a nest as this, deserve a picture and a

chapter to themselves. Yet does our picture hardly do them justice, or give an idea of the disproportion there really is between the workers and the work.

For the Long-tailed Titmouse is such a

tiny creature, at least its body is so small, 388

THE LONG-TAILED TITMOUSE AND NEST.

we feel tempted to believe that its wonderful instinct must reside in its tail! Its whole length is five inches and a half, of which three inches are taken up by the tail; so that there is no doubt the tail has some special part to fulfil in the business of the little bird’s life.

The shape of these pretty architects is very elegant, and the rose tint on the breast very soft and pleasing, though the general colouring is not so bright

as that of some others of the titmouse family.

Unlike them, they are shy and retiring, and do not thrust themselves on our notice. Yet is their nest generally placed, not in the depths of the woods, but somewhere nearer to human habitations. In the densest part of the shrubbery, in the thick hedge at the end of the garden, you may probably find it after diligent search; but even after it has been found, it will be quite another thing to reach it. In the very centre of the bush it is placed, so well guarded by interlacing twigs around it, that these must often be cut away if you want to touch the beautiful structure, - one such as no fairy fingers could ever have framed. Spiders' webs are supposed to figure largely among the fairies, and our fairy has used them too, but rather in the way of adornment than as forming part of the walls of the house. These are compacted of moss, firmly yet

THE LONG-TAILED TITMOUSE AND NEST.

lightly welded together, and attached to two or three small branches as the foundation of the whole.

But thus far it is only similar to the nest of the goldfinch or chaffinch, and with nothing particularly distinctive about it. But onwards and upwards the work proceeds, till it is a cone in shape, rounded and finished up with the most perfect symmetry; while the interior is fitted up, as advertisements tell us, “with every convenience,” that is to say, it is the softest bed of feathers which the most luxurious titmouse could desire.

The entrance is at the side, near the top, and across it is placed a feather, which the bird pushes backwards and forwards as it goes in and out, and which thus answers the purpose of a door turning upon its hinges. Now and then there is a second hole, opposite to this one, like a back door; so that in case of any alarm in front the inmate could escape behind.

It takes a whole month to build the nest, and both birds help to do it. Hard work it is even for them both, with the blustering March winds to hinder, and sometimes a snow-storm to try their spirits. By the time they have finished, the fresh young leaves of the hawthorn hedge have closed over it and hidden it from view, and the small 40

THE LONG-TAILED TITMOUSE AND NEST.

white buds of the coming hawthorn blossom are beginning to appear.

In the midst of the downy bed the delicate, pink-spotted, transparent eggs are laid, and in due time ten, twelve, or fourteen little yellow creatures roll over each other amongst the feathers. Happily they have no tails yet, or it might be difficult to know what to do with them. The mother’s tail, while she is sitting on her eggs, has to stand up against the side of the nest in a most uncomfortable position, and the wonder is that it is not permanently bent. But she springs out, and the tail falls down into its proper place, and no harm is done.

After a few weeks, and after a vast amount of feeding from the careful parents, the young family are advanced enough to emerge from their warm nursery. But they never unlearn the lessons of their early life; and as they have begun it in such close proximity, it is pleasant to think they keep together still. At least, for the whole of the following summer, father, mother, and children flit about in company.

They must be amiable in

disposition, for you never see them quarrelling.

They never want their own way, for where one goes all the rest follow. You never see one sulky and left behind when the family party travel.

THE LONG-TAILED TITMOUSE AND NEST.

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They have no song to give us, only a weak, gentle kind of call-note, which seems used principally to keep the children together. You hear it, and look up into the branches over your head; then you catch sight first of one whisking tail, then of another, till you have counted ten or twelve interesting little creatures, hunting for insects, and enjoying, doubtless, their happy young life. Presently one jerks itself off to the next tree, and then all the rest by degrees do the same.

It is a pretty

sight to watch them; it is such an exemplary family.

”””

We were told in our childhood that “birds in their little nests agree; and if we could also have read the life story of the long-tailed titmouse, it might have been still more effectual to “point the moral” and enforce the lesson for future life. May the happy family long continue to live in harmony.

Meanwhile we think there is one thing even more wonderful than the artistic skill which God has given to this small and insignificant creature.

is, that anybody should be found who could dare to lay hands on such a perfect and costly piece of workmanship, belonging, not to himself, but to another. He might well be rebuked as was the little boy, who, climbing up to rob a sparrow’s nest, found a fragment of paper woven into the structure, It

THE LONG-TAILED TITMOUSE AND NEST.

and on it read, with a convicted conscience, the following verse :—“Why
should I deprive my neighbour

Of his goods against his will?

Hands were made for honest labour,

Not to plunder nor to steal.”

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VIII.

Anderneath the Trees.

THE buds have done their work,
and disclosed the inner life which
they had been so long and so
carefully guarding. And now, as
we gaze at the wood from without, we see a mass of summer
foliage in its complete and perfect
form. It is beauty of quite a different kind. The delicate colours

UNDERNEATH THE TREES.

of the opening leaves, which we thought so charm-ing, have settled down into one dull expanse of green, totally without that individuality of each special tree which was so pleasing to the eye in the spring-time.

But we must not grieve, nor spoil the present in regrets for the past. The autumn will surely come, and then each member of the forest will stand out in its glory as a separate creation, and claim its individual place once more.

Let us meantime remember, as we look into the depths of green before us, that they do not represent a forest and nothing more. No, the wood is the seat of life. A world of life lies hidden underneath these trees. There are the birds, which sing among the branches, as we all know. There are the myriad insects, which hold their court and live their little lives in these shadowy places. Each has its own chosen home, its own household tree, round which it circles, the centre of its hopes and fears, the sustainer of its existence during life, and the guardian of its progeny when its own short span is over.

The oak tree alone supports its fifteen hundred pensioners, and the sturdy frame sinks not beneath the weight of this accumulated responsibility. Every other tree has its own establishment in the same UNDERNEATH THE TREES.

way, and within its leafy curtain microscopic mysteries of life and death are for ever going on,-faint and far-off copies of the human life so high above them in the scale of being.

But we must descend lower still.

life to be searched for yet.

There is more

The moss, the soft

green moss, is as full of insect life as the tree which overshadows it. And wonderful it is to think that its own organism is as complete and its own miniature powers as fitted for the place it has to fill.

For never has woodland tree had the same important part to perform which the lowly moss has day by day. The “power of littles” is exemplified in its history. We might perchance count the trees in the forest, but we could hardly number the stems of the moss upon the bank, or the coloured patches of lichen upon the rock. The moss spreads from one end to the other, and the lichen stains every stone and covers every prostrate trunk within its boundary.

And the reason why these lowly forms of vegetable life are so important is, because their work is the very beginning of all the rest. They are the pioneers of the army which is to follow; their life is ordained to be the preparation for the lives of the race above them. They must enrich the soil,

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they must keep it moist, they must make things ready for the forest lord beneath whose protection they dwell. The wood is a commonwealth, in

which each inhabitant depends upon his neighbour; and in which, too, those in the humblest sphere are the foundations which bear up the others.

The work-shop of Nature is below; we see the final touches, but not her patient labour under-ground. Out of sight, out of hearing, the quiet mosses live and die, but not in vain. Nourished by them, the trees take root and grow and spread, and their branches wave, and the harmony of Nature is complete.

And it is to be noticed that this tribe of plants cover a larger portion of the Earth's surface than any other.

The flowers of the valley grow up the

mountain-sides to a certain height, but there comes a point where even the hardiest refuses to go further. One after another they are left behind; but the moss and the lichen brave the stern region of winter, and will follow to the limit of perpetual snow. And even in the arctic lands these faithful adherents stay to the very last.

And how about the dead leaves which, season after season, strew the ground beneath the trees?

Is their work done because, when their bright summer life is over, they lie softly down to rest UNDERNEATH THE TREES.

under the bare wintry boughs? Is it only death, and nothing beyond?

Nay; if it is death, it is death giving place to life. Let us call it rather change, progress, transformation. It must be progress, when the last year's leaves make the soil for next year's flowers, and in so doing serve a set purpose and fulfil a given mission. It must be transformation, when one thing passes into another, and, instead of being annihilated, begins life again in a new shape and form.

And so we arrive at another of Nature's parables, and see that the humble and the lowly have their post to hold as well as the great ones and the mighty.

The trees of the wood are comparatively few; but the moss beneath encircles the Earth with its green embrace, covering up the unsightly, softening the rock's rough edges, and creating that which was not before. Nobody thinks about it, nobody thanks it; but it does its work, unknown and un-noticed, all the same. What but the moss could do it? and without the soft velvet carpet which deadens the heaviest tread, what would the world be?

The solemn mountains are around us, in their grand, unutterable beauty. A deep feeling of their magnitude presses upon our hearts as we turn to 48

UNDERNEATH THE TREES.

the great Creator with a new sense of the oft-repeated words, and say, "For thine is the power."

And then we look at the mossy tufts beneath the trees, which clothe their base, and we remember how often it is His appointment that "the weak things of the world confound the things that are mighty." And over these lowly forms of life in their humble sphere, so exquisitely contrived and so

perfect in their adaptation to it, we say again, with a yet deeper meaning, “Thine is the power, and the kingdom, and the glory.”

IX.

The Nightingale.

(617)

THE nightingale is not a “wandering voice” like the cuckoo. That dreamy sound which comes to us through the woods, now on this side and now on that, is gone the next minute, nobody can say whither. But the nightingale is to be found spring after spring on the same tree. We may know the

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THE NIGHTINGALE.

All

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very branch it likes the best, and the very way it will probably turn its head while singing. I admire this faithfulness on the part of the nightingale ; indeed, it is remarkable how most of the birds of passage return to the same spot where they sang their songs and reared their young last year.

honour to them that a six months' foreign residence does not make them forget an English home!

is a mistake to suppose the nightingale to be a shy bird. This is one of the popular delusions very hard to root out of people's minds, unless, indeed, they have happened to make friends themselves with the little, plain, brown creature, and have thus discovered it to be almost as sociable under certain circumstances as the robin.

Sometimes a nightingale will make its nest in a garden in one of the low bushes or shrubs; and it will then pick up the worms from the grass-plot, or the crumbs from the gravel path under the window with the greatest composure. In one case a pair built in a cosy corner close to a door opening on to the lawn, and through which a merry group of children were constantly running in and out. They were carefully enjoined not to touch the nest, and they never did. The nightingales never heeded them, and the young family were hatched and reared in safety. That did not look like shyness of THE NIGHTINGALE.

character. Another pair once took up their abode in the ivy that grew round a pretty country-house in Germany. Little footsteps pattered about the garden, and the owners sat in an arbour close by sipping coffee and talking; but it made no difference to the nightingales, and they never believed that anybody meant to do them harm. A little stream ran beside the garden fence, and at night when the children were in bed, and every other bird had put its head under its wing and was gone to roost, the song of the nightingale blended with the gentle ripple of the water, and not another sound was to be heard at all. All day, too, the same song went on; but it did not seem quite so sweet as in the stillness of the night.

One day the lady of the house went to take a peep into the nest, and instead of five brown eggs, she saw five baby nightingales with wide, gaping mouths. There was no more singing then, for the mouths had to be fed, and they grew on faster and faster, till at last, when she went to take her usual look, the nest was empty. She felt doubtful whether they could fly, and was afraid something had happened to them. While pondering where to look for them, the nightingale appeared and began fluttering about her, and then flying to the end of the border, as if it wished to attract her attention.

THE NIGHTINGALE.

Her curiosity was excited, and presently she discovered the whole family hidden in a periwinkle bed, quite safe, though very frightened and flurried.

The lady was in despair, for she had a favourite cat, and how could she make the cat understand that the young nightingales were not to be eaten?

Perhaps something had disturbed them in the nest -at any rate, they had left it too early, before they were able to take care of themselves.

So the poor

cat was shut up within the house, and for a whole week the children kept guard in turn over the helpless little creatures all day long. The father and mother fed them diligently, without the least regard to the presence of the children, and at the end of the week they were able to fly off the ground to the surrounding shrubs. The cat was set free, and the little episode was happily over.

If the nightingale is sometimes trustful and sociable like this, we ought at any rate to show ourselves worthy to be trusted. But we are concerned to say such is not the case. The nightingale is ruthlessly snared and caged spite of sympathy and spite of penalties. They used to pine and die in confinement,-which, of course, was the proper and poetical thing for them to do; but people have now found out what food suits them, and so they do manage for a while to drag on a

THE NIGHTINGALE.

miserable existence in a cage.

On the Continent

they are captured more freely than even in England; and English travellers who, from their position at home- -too far north or too far west-have no acquaintance with the nightingale, have sometimes heard it for the first time a prisoner in a foreign city.

It is a well-known fact that it never visits Scotland, neither Wales nor Devonshire; and though it might shrink from the colder regions of the north, we are at a loss to think why it should despise our warm western counties. Most likely some favourite insects are not to be found there, and so instinct teaches it to turn its flight elsewhere.

The nightingale's song is in some seasons rare and fitful, and so it is valued more. In other years it is heard night after night, and all day long as well; for it is a popular delusion to suppose it to be only a creature of the darkness. "The wake-ful bird sings darkling," it is true; but just as truly does it sing in the sunshine. When it takes its rest is a mystery. It would seem as if the dawn of morning-just as other birds are waking up-were the only time for it to snatch a little repose; -unless, indeed, there be an organized watch of nightingales, and they arrange to sleep and wake by turns!

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THE NIGHTINGALE.

No other bird has the same variety in its song as the nightingale, but in the point of sweetness many others may compare with it. There is a wildness in the note of the linnet, a pathos in the evening hymn of the woodlark, a richness in the flute-like voice of the blackcap, which are not within the

com-pass of the powers of the nightingale. But then the strain has so many parts, the performer is such an accomplished musician, it would ill become us to dethrone him from the pedestal where the poets of all ages have placed him.

There are those (we do not mean the poets) who tell us there is no music in Nature, not even in the song of birds; that Nature only supplies the materials, and out of these man makes the music; but he who could hold to this belief while sitting under the poured-out melody of the nightingale must be dull of hearing indeed. A happier and a simpler faith will look up through the budding trees to the blue April sky, and will say with good Isaak Walton: "Lord, what music must thou have provided for thy saints in heaven, since thou givest bad men such music on earth!"

X.

The Cuckoo.

A CERTAIN cuckoo, one day last summer,

was flying over a certain district of North Wales. At the same time, on a green

bank in the lane which went winding up

the lower slope of a mountain, there was a pipit's nest. The two things were ready

for each other, and the cuckoo flew down

and laid its egg in the lonely nest among the grass. The pipit had made it for its own eggs, and not for the cuckoo's; but that did not matter, 56

THE CUCKOO.

the cuckoo not having very definite ideas about a neighbour's property, and the pipit of course knowing nothing about it.

In due time the young cuckoo was hatched, and then it turned the other eggs out of the nest, and reigned alone, with nobody to interfere.

The pipit

must have been rather surprised, but went on feeding the stranger just as kindly as if it had been her own offspring.

But one day some mountain children, wandering about, found the nest with the cuckoo in it, and forthwith took possession, carrying both home in triumph to their own cottage half way up the hill-side. Their mother received the young cuckoo kindly, begged or borrowed a large gilt cage for it, and then placed it in a little garden in front of the house at the other side of the path.

The next difficulty was, how was it to be fed?

and who could know what was the best food to give it?

This uncertainty was soon over, for presently the little pipit, which had been following all the time, came and popped a delicious morsel into the baby's mouth. It came again, and never ceased to do so through the day, and every day after. When we saw it-coming on the unwonted sight while wandering on the Welsh mountains one bright August day—the same thing had been going THE CUCKOO.

on for six weeks.

grown and in excellent condition; but oh, the poor pipit it was so thin and spare,—it was nothing but a shadow. Every few minutes a gentle chirp denoted its return from its forage, and while it perched on the rails for an instant to be sure that there was no danger near, the cuckoo, whether it saw it or not, would get excited and would open its mouth ready for its food. Then the little pipit would fit through the cage bars and drop the caterpillar or the spider into it, the wide, gaping throat suggesting the idea that the young monster intended to swallow its foster-mother and all.

The cuckoo was almost full—

At night, we were told, the cage was taken into the cottage kitchen with the window left open, and daily, as soon as the first streak of light appeared, there would appear the pipit too, bearing an early breakfast for the cuckoo.

Whether the pipit died from exhaustion and over-work, of which we could not but feel some apprehension-what became of the cuckoo so carefully tended, but unable to depart with the rest of its race when the time of migration came-how the little episode ended, we cannot tell. Probably the cuckoo, after struggling through the first approach of autumn, lies buried now in the cottagers' garden; while the pipit has sunk down into its grave amidst 58

THE CUCKOO.

the heather on the mountain-side, having done bravely the task given it to do, to feed the cuckoo, -and perhaps, we may also add, “to adorn a tale.”

The habits of the cuckoo are well known, but the why and the wherefore of these habits are not so easy to be discerned. The young bird lives so much longer in a state of dependence than others, that it would not be ready to provide for itself in August, which is the time when, as the old song says

about the cuckoo, “go he must.” So it would seem necessary that the cuckoo should depute to others the parental labours which would otherwise be its own. But this is only putting the reason of the thing a step further back; for why should this one tribe of birds be so constructed as to take longer time in coming to maturity? Everything is misty in the cuckoo’s history; we only know that as a matter of fact it does lay its egg in the nest of the hedge-sparrow, water-wagtail, or pipit, and then takes no further interest in the matter. It may be that instinct teaches it that the food with which these birds feed their young is that best suited to its own. But in our uncertainty we can at any rate fall back on the wisdom of the Great Creator, and believe that He is teaching us how many different means He has of accomplishing the same purpose.

THE CUCKOO.

Whatever we may feel about the character of the cuckoo, it does not alter our regard for him nor the eagerness with which we watch, after the long, dreary winter, to catch the first sound of the well-remembered voice. Even those who tell us there is no music in the song of the birds will admit that the cuckoo sings correctly and on true musical principles. But it is not for these reasons that the simple notes enter into our hearts. It is because they are associated with our childhood and our early years; because they come to us blended with happy memories of the woods and visions of the flowers. Yes, and with tender recollections of some who were beside us once, but who are now among the flowers that never fade, and beneath the shadow of the Tree of Life.

The song of the cuckoo is so dreamy, so like an echo of something else, and there is something so mysterious in it as coming from a bird so seldom seen, we do not wonder that many superstitions should cling to it. Maidens listen, and believe the number of times it is repeated when first they hear it will be the number of years before they marry: the aged and the weary ask it how long before their rest will come, and they too listen for the answer.

A still more touching belief among country people is, that it is a voice from the spirit land.

We

THE CUCKOO.

remember once, as we laid a beloved one in her grave one bright May morning with all nature rejoicing around, how, as the last words of the holy service died away, there came the call of the cuckoo; and in such a moment we could almost have believed it true. It seemed to bring a strange and sudden comfort with it-like a message from that “prepared kingdom” to tell us that, after all, it is not so very far away. Since then the cuckoo has been a different being to us from that which it was before.

XI.

En the Woods in Etaly.

1

WE are in the woods, indeed; yet things

familiar and things unfamiliar seem blended together as we sometimes feel them to be

in a dream. There is much that reminds

us of home; and yet and yet is it a

dream?-that lake, blue as the sky and

still as a sea of glass, of which we catch glimpses through the trees? And what mean those steep hills covered with vineyards; and those purple rocks above; and far away, fading into the distance, those glorious peaks of snow?

IN THE WOODS IN ITALY.

No, it is no dream, but a delicious reality. We are in the woods in Italy. It is not all new and strange, however. The dandelion, and the daisy, and the clover were growing thickly by the roadside as we passed along; and as we entered into the shade, the sound of "Cuckoo! cuckoo!" full of its home sweetness and its happy associations, floated through the soft, balmy air. There are some bright poppies in the barley-field close by, and at our feet is a real stinging nettle of the proper English type.

But there are other things which our England knows not. Hanging over the cottage doors, spreading along the terraces on the hills, in every available spot where a vine can be planted, the vines grow. They need only to be planted; Nature, in this luxuriant land, does all the rest, save gathering in the fruit. In some spots as we look down on them from our height in the wood, we see them trained over flat frame-works of wood five or six feet high, so that underneath them is a covered way,-a long, shadowy alcove, forming a refuge from the heat of the summer sun; and here a crop of grass, fresh and green, is being just now gathered in by the peasants. For the soil is so fertile, the vines do not want it all; there is nourishment enough left for the grass even when they have extracted from it IN THE WOODS IN ITALY.

all they need. Crop after crop can be raised on the same ground in continuous succession. There is an ingathering always going on,-mulberry leaves for the silkworms, grass for the cattle, wheat for man ; then comes the vintage, and the harvest of the Indian corn, to wind up the produce of the year.

But it is not autumn yet; we are only in the first glory of the early summer foliage. Let us plunge still deeper into it. Of course there is a stream here; not a lazy, sluggish stream, creeping on, but a bold, rushing mountain torrent, boiling over with excitement, leaping from rock to rock, and falling rather than flowing through the wood, as if it were impatient to share the sunshine which bathes the wide blue lake far below.

We follow its course up the ravine, sometimes crossing it as best we can on the huge stones, sometimes clinging to the acacia boughs which fringe its banks; rather painful work, since acacia boughs have thorns, and sharp and strong ones too. The wood is composed of oak and ash, interspersed here and there with the lovely white flowers of the acacia.

Underneath are the softest cushions of moss to lie upon, and the greenest of ferns to droop over them.

Oh, the ferns!-have we ever seen the like elsewhere ? The royal osmunda, of true regal stature; the oak fern and the beech fern covering the steep 64

IN THE WOODS IN ITALY.

banks above the stream, lovely in the far-off Scottish woods, but lovelier still here; and there on the rocks, where the water drops continually, the graceful sprays of the tender, much-coveted maiden-hair.

For flowers we have tall spikes of white blossoms like the star of Bethlehem, forget-me-nots of the richest blue, and an elegant grass which lights up the shady places everywhere with its white flower-like tufts.

And is there silence amid all these woodland charms? Nay, the nightingale is singing; the voice of the blackcap has never stopped since we entered the glen. We could hardly have picked out any other song which would fit in so well with the surrounding scene; the sweet rippling notes seem part of the music of the stream and to partake of its character.

Higher and higher have we climbed, and now we pause. The wood is more open here, and the sunlight rests upon the bed of heather,-yes, real Scotch heather!-upon which we throw ourselves, as we have done so many times before in the old country.

Ah! we never saw there such a scene as this.

Far below lies the lake with its islands, on which are orange-trees and palm-trees, if we were not too IN THE WOODS IN ITALY.

far off to see them. A belt of fruit trees-mulberry, fig, and walnut-fringes the shore between the wood and the lake. The steep vine-clad hills spring directly out of the water on every other side; over these are the rocks that rise stern and bare, till at the summit they are streaked with the remnants of the winter's snow, one peeping over the other in unending succession, till-at the head of the lake many miles away, yet seeming near in this transparent atmosphere-the peaks of eternal snow make the final setting of the picture. We feel as if we were in a vast hot-house, with the warm air around us, and the fragrance of the flowers load-ing it.

Every sense is satisfied, -the colouring so vivid, the scents so delicious, the view one of such over-powering beauty. What more could be desired?

The purple tint upon the hills, the depth of the blue, the freshness of the green, the purity of the snow-oh! surely in all our wanderings through the woods we are never likely again to come upon such a sight as this! Is it fairyland, or is it a little bit of heaven let down to earth?

It is common earth, after all; yet never, we think, was earth so like to heaven. Never were it so easy to frame to ourselves a picture of the Better Land. As we gaze, a vision of that new Jerusalem, (617)

IN THE WOODS IN ITALY.

of which this exceeding loveliness is but the type and shadow, seems to stand out before us; and we lift our eyes reverently to the hills, and ask that from the beauty of these things seen and temporal, we may rise to the glory of the things unseen and eternal.

XII.

Wild Flowers from the Woods,

ARRANGED AT A FLOWER SHOW.

O CHILDREN of the grassy glade

And green haunts far away!

What hand hath searched the woodland
shade,

And borne you here to-day,

To raise each pale and lowly eye

‘Mid blossoms of a warmer sky?

Perchance the thought which fondly planned These clusters faint and fair,

Had deemed them not unmeet to stand

Beside exotics rare,

WILD FLOWERS FROM THE WOODS.

Whose tended petals never knew

The freshness of the early dew.

We know not; but full well we know

Our eyes with joy have smiled,

To greet amid this flowery glow

These blossoms of the wild.

We turn from all away to pour

Our heart's love over you once more.

Oh! ye have come from forest bowers

All carpeted with bloom,

Where snowy wreaths of hawthorn flowers

Light up the twilight gloom;

From grassy

fields on whose

green breast

The shade of passing clouds doth rest.

Ye've heard the skylark's voice at morn,

The blackbird's evening song;
And breezes o'er your head have borne
The cuckoo's note along,
Dying, then bursting forth anew,-
O flowers, we would we had been you!
The lily from the streamlet's bed,
The hyacinth's deep bell,
The cowslip, though the spring has fled,
Still lingering in the dell,-
Here wreathed in moss ye mingle free,
A fair and fragrant company.
Yes! tell us tales of leaf and breeze,
And Nature's own sweet store;

WILD FLOWERS FROM THE WOODS.

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For, oh remote from things like these,
Our hearts are wearying sore;
They thirst for them e'en as the roe
Pants for the far-off fountain's flow.
We've talked with you on hill and plain
In many by-past hours;
We would our steps were free again
To tread among the flowers.
Yet, ye have taught us much before,
Then teach us now one lesson more.
Ye shrink not from the world's rough ways, Nor droop in sorrow here;
The same calm trustful eyes ye raise,
The same meek aspect wear:
Torn from the moss bed and the rill,
Ye smile content and cheerful still.

XIII.

The Kingfisher.

ERVEE

ONE might have thought this brilliant gem had been blown to us across the sea from some Indian isle, an exiled stranger amidst our birds of sober plumage.

But no, it is a true dweller in the woods and beside the streams. Moreover, it lives and dies there, and never leaves us for warmer climes. Neither does it inhabit only some scene of special loveliness to which THE KINGFISHER.

only a few can have access; on the contrary, it is, we might say,—“A creature not too bright nor good

For human nature’s daily food.”

And if beauty be a thing we care to live upon and care to seek for, we shall surely find it in this instance.

Doubtless we must seek it in the proper place.

Let us cross this stile and follow the pathway; it leads us into an ordinary wood, where the elm-trees branch over our heads, while underneath the ferns grow in graceful circles. The foot falls noiselessly upon the mossy carpet, and all is green and quiet; yet it is only an everyday walk: there are neither rocks nor hills around us, nor torrent to hurry past us. But a little further on we shall find the kingfisher. The path opens, the sunlight falls through upon the green moss-bed, and we come to a lonely mere in the very midst of the wood.

There are reeds and bulrushes standing in the water at one side; on the other is a steep bank over-hung with alders and wych-elms. On a projecting branch of one of them we catch sight of something blue and green and yellow, but what it is we have not time to determine. The brilliant unknown plunges with a sudden splash into the mere, and vanishes as completely and as quickly as if it had 72

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been a stone thrown in. This is the kingfisher: but do not be uneasy about him; he will not be drowned, but will come up in a minute or two with a fish in his beak, and hardly a trace of the watery element on his glossy plumage.

Thomas Edwards, the Scotch shoemaker naturalist, -who made shoes by day, while he gave his nights to the higher calling of searching out Nature’s

secrets, tells us of his unbounded delight when he first made acquaintance with the kingfisher; but equal to this was his agony of mind when he saw the beautiful creature fall, as he thought, into the water. He was only five or six years old, but he was fully intending to throw off his infantine jacket and plunge in to the rescue, when, to his great relief, the bird appeared again, none the worse, and so his good offices were not needed.

The kingfisher has no objection to a dragon-fly as it darts by with colours beautiful as his own, the rainbow tints on the gauzy wings of the pursued vying with the feathers of the pursuer.

But he is

made for fishing, and may well be called the kingfisher from his adroitness in the art, as well as the splendour of the dress in which he accomplishes it.

The success of his fishing depends on the calmness of the water, so that through the clear medium the keen eye of the fisher may be able to detect the fish THE KINGFISHER.

below the surface.

It has been even said that the

brilliancy of his colouring acts as a charm on them, and attracts them to the spot. Whether this be true or not, the mere must be transparent and not muddy, the river must be so clear that you can see the pebbly bed over which it ripples, else it is no place for the kingfisher.

Hence has arisen the popular belief that the appearance of the kingfisher or halcyon always brings fine weather; a belief which just reverses cause and effect.

It can catch no prey on stormy

days, and so it remains secluded till it can get a chance again. To meet this state of things, it is provided with a large appetite, and the power of stowing away a vast quantity of food, which it digests afterwards at its leisure; so that it feasts and fasts alternately without any injury to its internal economy.

In one respect we feel great sympathy with the kingfisher; we mean his fondness for quietude. He will sit for hours gazing, as it would seem, into the river as it glides by, from some dead branch which hangs over it. He does not like noise, but enjoys nature most when he is quite alone. Perhaps you may say that he is only digesting his dinner; but we prefer to think that in meditative mood he is moralizing over the charms of seclusion.

THE KINGFISHER.

We would advance yet another claim which he has upon our respect. He possesses the organ of locality; and when once he has taken possession of a hole in the bank for the family home, he never changes it. All his life long he clings to the same spot; and generation after generation of young kingfishers enter upon the excitements of fishing from beneath the same roof. So that where we have seen the kingfisher one season, unless he has come to an untimely end, we are almost sure to find him the next one.

If the scenes around are lovely and uncommon, no doubt the sight of the beautiful bird gives an additional charm to them; the glancing of those metallic plumes always is a surprise and a pleasure, come when it may. But it is when the scenes are homely and commonplace that the light of its presence is more fully appreciated. It is like a little bit of poetry lighting up the everyday duties of life, and giving them a touch of its own brightness.

We cannot always live upon the high places, but we can bring a glint of the sunrise down to the lowliness of the valley, and make the sweet influences of the beautiful a help to the practical.

XIV.

The Woods in Switzerland.

WE are six thousand feet above
the sea, and it might be supposed
we had left both birds and trees

far below us. But Nature's resources are not so limited as that.

Rather let us say, the great
Creator displays His resources in
providing at every step of the
Gascent, as well as in the valley
beneath, the vegetable life suited

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to it, one thing fitting in to another, the construction of a plant corresponding closely with the conditions under which it has to live; so that as we contemplate it we can only exclaim with David, "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches" (Ps. civ. 24).

It is true we have parted one by one with many dear and familiar friends. The Spanish chestnut, the mulberry, the walnut have vanished; the roses, and the olives, and the luxuriant flowering shrubs we left long ago on the sunny plains of Italy; there are no more fruit trees in the gardens; even the gardens themselves are gone, and the whole company of deciduous forest trees have been likewise swept away as it were from the face of creation.

But yet

the earth is not desolate. We have the larch, and the pine, and the Alpine cedar in dark abundance; and the old Scotch fir rears its scraggy head independently against the snow, as if it thought it had a right to the mountain soil and the mountain side wherever it might be found.

The earth desolate! is there nothing left in these wild heights but the gloom of the fir forests? Then what mean those patches of colour, blue as Italian skies, pink as the sunset cloud, or pale yellow, sweet as the most delicate primrose of far-off England?

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These are the Alpine flowers; and nothing lovelier can Flora show in her whole wide realm than these, which blossom on the very outskirts of her kingdom.

A little more than a fortnight ago the ground.

where we stand was covered with the same snow which rests still on the mighty peaks rising above us; and now it is carpeted with flowers, as if it had been some transformation of fairyland! The gentianella, with its untold depths of blue and its earnest upward gaze, as well as a whole race of smaller gentians equally exquisite in colour; the forget-me-not studding the meadow grass like tur-quoise gems; the yellow anemone, perhaps the loveliest of all, and a pure starry white one growing on the very edge of the snow; a tiny crocus, which looks like snow-flakes left behind amidst the green grass blades; the dwarf azalea and the dapne with its delicious fragrance, these, and myriads more, are just outside the wood, or in the wood, as we enter beneath its shadow.

Up the side of the almost perpendicular height the pine-trees climb. How they get nourishment enough to grow is a marvel. God can make a little enough if so He wills it, and here He orders that the hardy roots should find the rock sufficient. The branches are torn and battered, telling tales of the wintry snow and the fall of the avalanche from the 78

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peaks above them, and of scenes of storm and struggle such as we can hardly realize in this present calm and cloudless sunshine. On many of their boughs grows a mass of loose flowing lichens, hanging down in threads like long gray hair, and giving a wild and weird character to the upper part of the wood, in strange contrast to the flowers below.

It is interesting to remember that the same snow which weighs down and breaks those fir branches is the nursing-mother of the flowers. Softly it

comes down upon the tiny seeds and the tender buds, and covers them up lovingly, so that from all the stern rigour of the world without they are safely sheltered.

Thus they are getting forward, as it were, and life is already swelling within them; so that when the sun shines and the snow melts they are ready to burst forth with a rapidity which seems almost miraculous.

It is not the only force gifted with both pre-serving and destroying power, according to the aspect in which we view it. The fire refines and purifies, but it also destroys; and the same water which rushes down in the cataract with such overwhelming power, falls in the gentlest of drops upon the thirsty flower-cup, and fills the hollow of the leaf with just the quantity of dew which it needs for its refreshment and its sustenance. And in THE WOODS IN SWITZERLAND.

those higher things of which nature is but the type and shadow, the same grand truth holds good; and from our Bibles we learn that the consuming fire and the love that passeth knowledge are but different sides of the same God;-just, and yet merciful; “that will by no means clear the guilty,” yet “shewing mercy unto thousands.”

But are the woods silent save for the hum of insects and the sighing of the wind amongst the branches? Oh no! the birds are here with their notes of content and their songs of praise. The swallows and the swifts circle round on their rapid wings from dawn to dusk; the pipit and the chaffinch sing all day long; the lark springs up at sunrise; and the sound of “cuckoo! cuckoo!” echoes with peculiar sweetness through the clear crisp air; two or three kinds of tomtits hang head downwards from the boughs, making merry as they go; the gray wagtail perches on a stone in the stream, and the clear white breast of the water-ouzel flashes across it; so that we are not left without sight or sound of these winged creatures of the plains. The ever faithful sparrow, too, is here of course; and alone of all his race he remains to brave the winter, and struggle through the snow-storms.

The other birds all depart. But why should they ever have come? Why should some amongst the 80

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inhabitants of the valleys leave the rest and mount up with weary wings for thousands of feet, and then in three brief months return whence they came?

We are at a loss to see the advantage to be gained.

But insect life abounds, and where this is the case the birds follow. Flies and gnats make continual sport in the air; there are enormous ant-hills in the woods, built up of the fallen fir needles; and butterflies abound likewise, some our common English ones, and some our rarer ones, with other lovely forms unknown to us. To see these graceful creatures fluttering over the

fallen masses of snow under the shadow of the stupendous mountains, is even more touching than the beauty of the flowers.

It would seem as if God had put them there “to whisper comfort to the heart of man.” Amid the power and might which He displays before us in these Alpine fastnesses He would fain send, by bird, and butterfly, and blossom, a message from that other side of His perfect character, and bid them say, “God is love.”

XV.

The Woodpecker.

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HAVE you a day to spare-a
day in which you shut up your
desk, push your ledgers aside,
and say a hearty “Yes!” to
the appeal of the poet,-
“Up! up! my friend, and clear your
looks;
Why all this toil and trouble?
Up! up! my friend, and quit your
books,
Or surely you’ll grow double;”

a day in which you leave your
watch at home, that you may

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take no count of time nor of meals, save only concerning the refreshments carried in your pocket ; a day in which you detach yourself alike from the past and from the future, and give yourself up to the undisturbed enjoyment of the present?

It needs this if you wish to see the woodpecker, for you must go to the woods indeed in search of him. He is not a bird to be found in your shrubberies, or your orchards, or even in the hedge or the copse, but in the real forest depths, where the trees are the oldest and the shadows fall the darkest.

Antiquity is important to the woodpecker; he has an objection to new plantations or anything modern. If he were a human being, he would be a stern upholder of the dark ages and medieval usages.

There is a reason for it in the woodpecker's case; for it is not the young tree but the old one which supplies it with food.

The woodpecker lives on insects which hide under the bark or bore into the wood. These latter ones always choose the wood which is decayed, and therefore soft, for their purpose; the woodpecker knows this, and so makes their feeding ground his own.

The wood is parcelled out amongst the insects as well as amongst the birds; each particular species occupies its own sphere, fills its own little corner,
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and bears its part in the great system of waste and production, demand and supply, as if the world were made only for them and insect-life were all.

They never overstep their bounds, nor trespass on the space allotted to their neighbour; as much as to the mighty ocean itself it might be said to them, "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further."

Thus each tribe is guided by its instinct to choose some suitable substance in which to lay its eggs; and it is this substance always which forms the food of the young grub when it wakes up to life.

It would perish if it did not find that which it needs lying, as it were, at its door. The cabbage-butterfly lays its eggs upon the cabbage not because it eats cabbage itself, but because the children the mother will never see will live on cabbages and nothing else. The peacock and admiral butterflies go to the nettle-bed; the egg-moth to the oak-tree; the cockchafer buries its eggs in the ground; while the whole race of flies and beetles have their different arrangements.

And so certain insects make their home in the interior of the hollow tree, living there for their own sustenance, leaving it a legacy to their descendants. The woodpecker follows them, and spends his life knocking at their doors and waiting for their answers. He always begins at the bottom

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of a tree, then ascends spirally, from story to story as it were. "Tap, tap!" goes the woodpecker's long beak on the outside of the bark; some foolish little insects coming out to see what is the matter, and returning to their shelter no more; and the practised ear of the bird telling by the sound of the tap what is the state of the wood, and whether it is likely that many stores are concealed within.

It creeps up the stem, clinging to the bark; and its tail, which is stiff and square, is pressed against it, so that it supports the weight of the body while the investigations are going on. Though not uncommon, the woodpecker is seldom seen because of this its habit of moving stealthily round the trunk, so that it can always keep on the farther side from any observer who may happen to be near. Its colour, too, helps concealment, as though the tint of the green woodpecker is very bright with some patches of red and black, it harmonizes with the foliage and the mossy bits on the dark stem, and the scarlet morsels of fungus found here and there upon the old tree.

Another species, the spotted woodpecker, frequents the trees on which grow lichens black and white; so that here too there is a blending of colours, and the bird does not stand out to view.

When the woodpecker has reached the top of a THE WOODPECKER.

height whither it has been travelling, it never re-traces the way downwards, but flies off to the next.

one. It has no song; but its peculiar cry, something like a laugh, may often be heard resounding through the wood. And the tapping of its beak is also a familiar sound to those who wander there with ears as well as eyes open to take in the impressions around them.

In the spring, of course, the nest has to be made, and this must partake of the woodpecker's habits.

If there is a place in a hollow tree sufficiently commodious, all well and good; if not, one must be made. The pair do it between them, working through the decayed wood with their beaks till the hole is large enough, and leaving a portion of the softer fibres as a kind of lining to the nest, -not SO warm as feathers, maybe, but all the young woodpeckers require.

The woodpecker bores with its beak for insects, but it extracts them from their retreats by means of its tongue, which is very long and glutinous, so that they adhere to it. It is also fond of ants, and frequents the fir-woods where large ant-hills abound.

The same useful tongue thrust into an ants' nest brings back with it a vast supply of the small and unsuspecting game.

And so the woodpecker spends its life, never 86

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taking long flights, never seeking company, never exploring distant lands: it lives and dies in the woods.

We cannot do the same life presses, business must be attended to, holidays must come to an end, the work-a-day world cannot be wholly set aside.

But we breathe freer, our nerves are calmer, our spirits are lighter, we worry less and we can trust more, because of this one day in the woods.

XVI.

The Mahali Weaver-Bird.

WE doubt whether among the tropical woods there is any nest to be compared, in point of finish, to that of our own golden-crested wren or goldfinch. But the goldfinch has some foreign relations who possess the family talent in an eminent degree.

The finches are all more or less skilful in nest-building, and the weaver-birds of which we speak are part of

THE MAHALI WEAVER-BIRD.

this large tribe. They inhabit the hot regions of both Africa and Asia; and several of the species construct nests peculiar to themselves, and which, in style, shape, and material, are essentially different from those fashioned by any other of the birds of the air.

Leaving out the nests of the long-tailed titmouse, magpie, and a few others, we have a stereotyped form which we consider the proper pattern for all birds' nests; but the weaver-bird is utterly unorthodox, and strikes out a path of its own.

Did we

think that Nature was so limited in her resources?

Could we fancy that there were no more things on earth as well as in heaven than we had dreamed of? Must the world consist in the repetition of the same pictures?

The weaver-bird steps forth from the palm-tree and puts an elaborate and curious nest before us as a practical answer to these unspoken questions.

This Mahali weaver-bird is about the size of a blackbird; and its plumage is brown, with a mixture of yellowish-white on the breast. Most of the tribe have the same kind of attire, -brown or black with hardly a dash of colour is their uniform. But it is no wonder that such clever workmen should wear a suitable working-dress.

The nest of this particular species is shaped THE MAHALI WEAVER-BIRD.

something like a flask turned upside down, or, rather, it resembles more the reed-covered bottles we sometimes see in shops. It is composed of a narrow passage, widening at the top into a cosy, comfortable chamber lined and padded. At the upper end -the end, of course, where the bird first began to work—it is attached to the leaf of a palm-tree, that being generally the situation it chooses.

It is composed of thick grass woven together so neatly and yet so firmly, the bird may well be called a weaver.

It is not welded, as the nest of our goldfinch or chaffinch is, into a felt-like mass, neither is it made solid by any secretion of its own, but is open and airy, yet of close texture, a piece of basket-work it would be difficult to match elsewhere.

The edges of the grass are left standing out, instead of being smoothed and polished; so that it presents a rough and bristling appearance.

The birds are very sociable: they live together, feed together, and rear their young together in the greatest friendship, forty nests having been counted on the same tree.

Indeed, sociability is another of the characteristics of the family. The sociable weaver-bird is still more remarkable for this amiable trait, so much so, that it abjures solitude for its whole life, and constructs a dwelling in which, though each household 90

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has its separate apartment, a vast number live together on republican principles. In the sandy deserts of South Africa grows a species of acacia called the giraffe-thorn, because that beautiful animal feeds upon it; and not only is it useful for this purpose, but, on account of the hardness of its wood, it is much valued for building and for agricultural implements. But it

has yet another vocation to fulfil, the sociable weaver-bird wants it to support the family-habitation it wishes to rear.

When the work is done, you might see at a distance something like the thatch of a house set round the giraffe-thorn; indeed, some weary travellers of the desert have thus mistaken it, and have been grievously disappointed to find, on a nearer approach, it was only the house of a company of birds.

The little workmen choose a tree which is somewhat sheltered,-it can hardly be in the woods in that arid land, at the most it can only be in an oasis in the desert. But, perhaps, the giraffe-thorn would not appreciate such a situation; it likes dry places and so does the sociable weaver-bird; thus the two are made for each other. Then the birds set to their task, and make, first of all, a large frame-work of dried grass, intertwined and laced together with great exactness, joined on to the trunk of the tree, and spreading, umbrella-fashion, round it.

THE MAHALI WEAVER-BIRD.

Underneath this they construct a number of separate nests, with their own private entrances, like the doors in a street, the umbrella projecting over all like the roof of a house, and making an effectual protection against the rain, which of course runs off, leaving the habitations perfectly dry. When the second year comes they do not use the old nests, but make new ones, and the roof has to be enlarged accordingly; and as the numbers also increase, the community becomes a very large one.

As many as three hundred inhabited nests have been counted under one covering; and they adhere together till at last the weight becomes too heavy, and with the next storm either the edifice tumbles to pieces, or the tree itself falls to the ground, burying the whole in one common ruin.

Another species of weaver-bird was brought to England some time since, and lived for a while in confinement. So strong was its instinct, it was accustomed to occupy itself with twining bits of grass in and out of the bars of its cage, as the best approach it could make to the woven nest of its wild state.

It would seem that the sociable species congregate together under the idea of greater safety and protection. In the case of the Mahali weaver-bird, there is no doubt that its special device in nest-

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building is an instinct given to it that it may escape its special enemies, the snakes and the monkeys.

Both of these creatures have a liking for eggs and young birds, and as both can climb the trees, the prey is easy to be obtained. But not so easy is it in this case. The palm-leaf or the twig would not bear the weight of either snake or monkey, and so the nest swings securely at the end. And even if they could reach it, the narrow passage and the reverse way of entrance forbid the advance of the intruder. The pensile weaver-bird always takes

care, also, to hang its nest on the boughs which droop over water, and in this way it makes assurance doubly sure.

Thus the diligence and the skill and the sagacious instinct of the weaver-birds unfold to us a new aspect of Nature; and as we turn page after page of the mighty book, it seems to present to us that grand climax of the children's wishes—a story without an end.

XVII.

BERVEIL

The Carolina Parrot.

AMONGST the wide variety of parrots, and the vast extent of their range in tropical and semi-tropical climes, there is only one species found in the United States. The Carolina parrot follows the course of the mighty Mississippi river, from the Gulf of Mexico north—wards, and finds a home in the dense luxuriant forests which rise from its banks.

Its general colour is a bright yellow green, soft and silky, with blue

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reflections; but there are edgings and fringings to its attire of red, orange, purple, and all intermediate tints so that when assembled in large flocks these Carolina parrots make such a gorgeous show, that even in a land so used to brilliant spectacles it almost seems to take people by surprise.

When they alight on the ground, it looks like a carpet of green and blue and yellow; but no weaver's loom could ever fashion such dyes as these.

If they settle on a tree, every bough is covered, and the effect is dazzling.

For they like close company, and are particularly sociable, even affectionate one towards the other.

If some of their number are shot, the others, instead of taking wing, hover around with every appearance of sympathy and concern. When they go to roost, they get as near to each other as they can, creeping into some hollow tree thirty or forty together all by the same hole, and sleeping, one might almost say,

with their arms round each other's necks.

They scratch each other's heads, and exchange evident marks of friendship—going to sleep at last huddled together in a perpendicular position, hanging on by their bills and their claws; -a very un-restful state we might suppose; but no doubt the parrots know their own affairs best. They have also the habit of sleeping in the day, and will

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often retire together to the same chamber for a siesta.

The whole tribe of parrots are made for climbing, and climbing is the occupation of their lives. They have their own way of doing it; it is not the way of the woodpecker, but one peculiar to themselves.

They travel not by the stem, but by the branch, and not by creeping, but by climbing. Their claws are very strong; but the thick hooked beak, which everybody knows, is the principal instrument of progression. With this they clutch the bough above them, and then draw themselves up by the claws.

The tail is also firm, square, and bent inwards, so that it can bear the weight of the body, and thus greatly assist the ascending process.

They live upon fruits and berries, and, with the help of the tail, they can stand upon one leg, while they carry their food to their mouth with the other - a peculiarity which has made some ingenious naturalists trace a connection between parrots and the monkeys, which share the same haunts, climb the same trees, and eat their dinners in the same manner. We need hardly say that in these things the resemblance ends.

The regions of the torrid zone in all the continents are bright with these many-tinted birds, and they will even go as far north as latitude 45°: 96

THE CAROLINA PARROT.

further than that they refuse to follow; they are children of the sun, and could not bear the frost and the snow. They live under the shadow of the plantain, and the cocoa-nut, and the bread-fruit trees, amidst orchids which match their own brilliant colours, and humming-birds even outshining them. Life goes on very smoothly with them, and life is long too. We have no means of ascertaining the duration of it in their wild state; but in captivity they live forty or fifty years, and their age has been known to attain to seventy or a hundred.

There are no birds to which such a power of imitation has been given; many others have it in some degree, but none are so highly gifted in this respect as the parrots. And as they are also intelligent and apt to remember, they have always been valued by man as pets and companions.

Henry VIII., we know, had a favourite parrot, which lived in his palace at Westminster, overhanging the Thames, and so picking up words from the passengers who went by. One day the poor parrot fell from its perch into the river, and most seasonably made use of a sentence it had learned: "A boat, a boat! twenty pounds for a boat!"

waterman heard the cry, and came to the rescue, feeling sure he should receive the promised reward.

But on restoring it to the king, the parrot again A

THE CAROLINA PARROT.

””

called out, “Give the knave a groat! So we fear that the hopes of the rescuer could hardly have been realized.

But long before this, the reign of the parrot had begun. Brought from India at the time of the Macedonian conquest, and passing from the Greeks to the Romans, it speedily grew into favour; high prices were paid for it and its cage, built of silver, gold, and other costly materials. The money lavished on parrots was bewailed by Cato as one of the signs of the degeneracy of Rome. In the time of Nero it was discovered that Africa produced parrots as well as India; and it was probably from thence that Heliogabalus imported them when he fed his lions.

with parrots, and had on his table dishes not only of nightingales’ tongues, but of parrots’ brains!

The memory of the parrot tribe is truly wonderful. When once they have mastered a word, they never forget it; and even if they should by any chance return to life in the woods, they take their acquisitions with them, speaking man’s language to their own race in a way which must mystify them considerably. A gentleman in India had tamed a parrot, and taught it to whistle “God save the Queen.”

The parrot in some way escaped from

confinement, and the gentleman never expected to see it again. Years had passed, and he was sitting 7

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under a tree one day resting, while on a hunting expedition. He started up, as well he might, for his ears were greeted with the old home-like sound of “

God save the Queen.” Whence came it there in the wilds? It came from his old pet: there was his parrot perched on a bough above him! It was a remarkable chance which brought the two together again, and remarkable that the parrot’s memory should so long have retained the words.

Yes, the parrot has many gifts-memory, intelligence, and outward beauty. Its colouring, how different from our dingy English browns; but then—but then—our dear dull browns can sing! That makes a great difference in striking the balance.

When we listen to two or three parrots only at the Zoological Gardens screaming together, we may fancy what the discord must be multiplied by hundreds !

Come back, then, to the thrush and the lark and the garden warbler. Sober they may be, but they have unmistakable sweetness, and we feel inclined to be satisfied.

P

XVIII.

The Bird of

Paradise.

THE loveliest and most gorgeous

of all the feathered tribes deigns
not to dwell in the woods with
us. It would hardly fit in with
us even in the summer time; and
then, how about the winter? With
all our yearnings after the beautiful,

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THE BIRD OF PARADISE.

we could scarcely wish to have a bird of paradise here, at the expense of finding it some cold morning frozen to death upon the bough!

No, we are content that its home should be far away in the Southern Ocean, in the warm Moluccas or Spice Islands. There are no leafless trees there, there are no wastes of snow. There are heavy rains sometimes, but nobody knows there is such a dreary thing as winter.

Three hundred years ago, when the Portuguese first visited the islands, the skins of certain birds were brought to them, so strange, and withal so beautiful, that they were told they were “birds of God.”

They appeared to have neither feet nor wings, and even in their dried state their colours were so brilliant, that the Portuguese echoed back the words, and called them “birds of the sun.”

The Dutch followed in their track, and they described them as “paradise birds.” The natives said they came over to their islands to eat nutmegs, and that they got tipsy with the spice, and would then fall down senseless underneath the trees. But very little information could be gathered about them.

Years passed away before anybody ever saw them alive; nothing was found out of their habits of life.

We know now that they have feet like other creatures, and very stout ones too; and wings where-

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with to fly, of the same construction as ordinary birds. We know that they are part of the lower world just as much as our own feathered and familiar friends; but their beautiful name still clings to them, and the peculiarity and radiancy of their plumage make it still as fitting to call them birds of paradise.

They belong to the same family as our crows and starlings; but our crows and starlings, bold as they are, would hardly be bold enough to claim kindred with such grand relations. There are many different species, all characterized by some special adornments of their own.

The engraving represents the greater

bird of paradise, a splendid mixture of colours; and though its body is no larger than a thrush, a long loose mass of floating plumes of brilliant or delicate yellow trails behind to the length of two feet, with two separate shafts longer still.

Another species, the king bird, is if possible yet lovelier. It is about the same size, its body rich.

brown, head and neck yellow, and breast green. But these colours do not constitute its charm. When the bird is at rest, you might not think it anything so unusual. But underneath its wings are hidden two long tufts of orange feathers, and when the owner is in motion these plumes are raised up into two magnificent gold fans, which overshadow all the rest of the body; the neck, back, and breast seem

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just the setting to the cloud of glory which rolls above them. The few who have seen, and been happy enough to see, one such king bird in its native woods have been lost in admiration, and have said that never name was better bestowed than this.

But it is not always alone; the king birds have pleasure in company. They are in the habit of meeting at the top of some tall tree, and there they raise their wings and elevate their plumes, and fly from branch to branch in a state of great excitement. These gatherings are called by the natives “dancing parties.” All the different species have these additional feathers variously disposed, and all most richly tinted. Some spring from the head or back; and others, as in the king bird, from under the wings. They can all raise them or fold them at their own pleasure. It is an extra appendage, which distinguishes them from every other race of birds with which we are acquainted.

Nobody has ever yet found the nest of the bird of paradise. We deem it rather a satisfaction to think that we have not yet got to the end of the world. It “has something yet to show,” and almost we determine to take a voyage to the Spice Islands, on purpose to join in the search for such a treasure.

A well-known naturalist* has paid several visits * See Mr. Wallace’s “Voyage to the Eastern Archipelago.”

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to the Moluccas, with the wish to find out all he could about the bird of paradise; and he has told us a great deal we did not know before. Once when he was returning to England he was able to bring back two of them alive. He had paid one hundred pounds for them, and he did not think it much, he was so anxious to possess them. He tended them so carefully that they arrived safely, and even lived for several years in the Zoological Gardens. But what do you think was the food of these beautiful creatures? Honey out of the flowers, or the most delicate fruits, you would suppose; or, possibly, they were too ethereal to eat anything at all!

Alas! the truth must be told;-through the voyage they lived on cockroaches! Mr. Wallace used to hunt the vessel for an hour every evening to find cockroaches for them; and when they halted at Malta, he got several biscuit-tins full from a bake-house, as a supply for the remainder of the voyage.

They would eat rice and bananas, yet they loved the cockroaches best. But it has been rather a shock to our feelings, and we gladly turn from the subject.

We are not surprised to hear that the feathers are used for personal adornment even in the East.

Fashion reigns in the Spice Islands as well as in 104

THE BIRD OF PARADISE.

England.

The chiefs put them in their turbans,

and the ladies in their head-dresses.

No description can give any idea of the beauty of these glorious birds. We cannot visit them in their native haunts, and our sole resource is to contemplate them in cases. We linger longingly and admiringly over that

special department in the British Museum where they abide. We gaze, and try to picture to ourselves the woods in the far-away tropics where once they sported.

And vague,

dreamy thoughts, of other things and higher things come too. The very name raises us above this world of sin and sorrow, and their exceeding beauty reminds us of the "Paradise of God."

XIX.

The Forget-me-not in the Woods.

FOR there is a forget-me-not of the woods as well as of the streams, though not so often.

found, and few people are familiar with it.

We do not mean the diminutive specimen

met with by the wayside as well as in the woods, but a large, full-grown, handsome one, rivalling the best of its fellows in the brightness of its azure blossoms; a little lighter in colour than the ordinary forget-me-not, and wanting the yellow eye, the foliage also lighter and less luxuriant, but in other respects bearing the full character of the rest of its race.

THE FORGET-ME-NOT IN THE WOODS.

So it lights up the woods instead of adorning the streams; which, according to our present subject, is a work equally meritorious. The plant which everybody calls the forget-me-not, as though there were no other, grows in ditches or wet places; but far be it from us to say a word to detract from its beauty.

Poets have sung about it; but, indeed, it needs no such external help,-its own charms are sufficient.

It is common enough to be always looked for, and yet so uncommon as to be worth seeking, and moreover securing when it is found; for this is generally at the cost of wet feet and some trouble.

And perhaps it is for this reason that we value it.

It hangs over the stream, seeing its own reflection in the clear, still water, but does not confine itself to that which is picturesque; on the contrary, it disdains not the pond or the muddy canal, favouring these places just as frequently. It takes its own beauty with it, makes its own atmosphere (happy plant!) around it, colours other things with itself, and its presence lights up the shady place with sunshine.

There are so few blue flowers, those we do possess are always prized. And hardly any are there of this particular shade. Except the garden nemo-phila, we know of none that can compare with the forget-me-not. The cornflower and the wild hya-
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cinth gleam out from the harvest field and the wood with their deeper hue; the harebell on the hill is pretty, but pale; the gentianella is unapproachable in its own special tint of blue; but none of these are the least like the forget-me-not-it alone seems the azure of the sky, and it bears on its forehead the very impress of heaven.

The forget-me-not on the mountains is of more humble growth, but not less brilliant in flower. Like all Alpine blossoms, it is large and full.

It grows

everywhere in the wood or out of the wood, it matters not-it forms patches underneath the pines, and makes the pastures a blue carpet instead of a green one. Up the sides of the rocky hills it creeps higher and higher, till at last it reaches its limit; it shivers at the snow, and leaves to the lovely little soldanella, more delicate but more brave, the task of adorning it and fringing it.

The largeness of the corolla of most mountain plants has often been remarked; it would seem as if the strength had all gone into the flower instead of being dispersed among the leaves. It is not accidental; there is a reason for it. Of course there is; but sometimes we have to take the why and the wherefore on trust, and believe where we cannot see.

In this case it is not faith, but sight, and the explanation is this: The summer in high latitudes is 108

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always short, and therefore there is less time for a plant to fulfil its functions. To bear seed is the end of its being, and to this result all else tends.

Some additional help must be provided, or the few short months will have passed away and the fruit not be brought to perfection. So the seed is

cradled in a larger blossom, that the petals may absorb a larger portion of the sun's rays, and so the ripening process be expedited. The tiny germ lies in this cradle sheltered from harm, with the curtains drawn around it, nursed and nourished all the while by that careful mother who spends as much toil and thought and pains in perfecting one single seed as if it were the only one in all the vast world, and this one work the only thing she had to do!

Soon after the late French and German War, an English traveller was visiting the scenes where some of the terrible events took place. The spring had come again, and was trying hard to fling her green mantle over the fearful past, and make the world look as it used to do.

In the neighbourhood of one of the German vic-tories the traveller came upon a countryman busy in his garden. But he did not seem just then to be cultivating it for himself. There was a grave at one end on which the grass was hardly yet grown green, and round which he was planting something.

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The traveller spoke to him, and asked if it were a friend's grave which he was thus adorning. "Oh no!" replied the German; "it is a Frenchman's grave: he was my enemy, and was fighting against my people. But it was a fierce battle, and he fell just outside my gate, so I brought him in and buried him in my little garden: we are all alike in death, you know; and now I am planting forget-me-nots round his grave."

A beautiful instance of forgiveness, and one which may well take its place among the many touching incidents connected with the forget-me-not.

SARGENT.5

XX.

Eby Leaves.

"OH, what beautiful leaves !" exclaimed a certain maiden as she stood beside a bank in the woods covered with luxuriant ivy. "Just the thing I want." She had an ivy—wreath already on her arm, and she was going to make another, for it was a fête day, and ivy was to be the special decoration. Ivy was to

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be worn, and nothing else; and great was the diligence needed to find the most elegant leaves, as well as the ingenuity to invent fresh devices in arranging them.

And, in truth, these did seem more beautiful than any before so vividly green and so sharply pointed, so delicately veined with the rich brown lines across them, every one a study in itself, every one different from its fellow: some covering up the soil,—a lowly task, but a useful one; some climbing up the stems of the trees, helping themselves up by their own efforts and tiny creeping rootlets,—the aspiring ones, as ever, the finest and most successful.

A shiver went through the ivy leaves; it was the rustle of the breeze as it passed by, and it gave a voice to the sentiment that lay concealed there.

“It is all very well for you to talk about our leaves being beautiful,” whispered the ivy; “but I don’t call that beautiful which is not doing what it was intended to do. Now, whatever our life may be in the future, at present it is a failure.

were made for blossoms, and not for leaves.

We

We

cannot blossom down here on the ground and in the shade; what we want is light and air and sunshine.

Why, you would not know me to be the same if you were to see me up on high where I could breathe, my angles rubbed off, my sharpness softened down, 112

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my leaves such a shining, sunny green, and such clusters of flowers rising over them. I don't believe you ever knew that the ivy could bear a flower at all; but, I repeat, that is my hope and my aim, and the end of my existence."

”””

Ah, well," replied the maiden; "but I suppose everybody has to do little bits of work as they go along, and even before they reach the special thing for which they were made; at least so they tell me, and so I believe, or else I should have to wait till I was quite grown up before I could be of any use to anybody, you know. But, oh! it is good of you now to grow such dear dark leaves for me to twine into my wreath; so you will be glad, will you not?

and for the rest, you must do as I am doing, and 'wait.'

"Wait!"

There was an echo to the word.

Where did it come from? It came from the young owls on the ruined wall up which the ivy was climbing. "Do as we do, and wait." The stems had grown so thick and matted, a pair of owls had built their nest there in a crevice of the stone-work, sheltered by the ivy-leaves, and supported by the brown clinging branches. They had reared their family in safety, and the little creatures, with their round comical faces and soft fluffy feathers, were waiting till they were big enough to fly.

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That was another little bit of work the ivy had done by the way-it had sheltered the owl's nest and nurtured the rising generation. But it did not think of this; it only grieved that its leaves were angular still, and that it had no blossom. Another shiver ran through the ivy leaves, for they were tired of waiting. They did not know that to do nothing is a part of life's plan as well as to be up and doing, and that oftentimes the longer the waiting the better is the blossoming.

Gradually they crept along, working themselves higher up, a little at a time-working and waiting, waiting and working, as occasion required. Would it be always like this; would the full development never come? Must the life of the ivy be a failure, after all?

Not so.

There is no such thing as failure. Success may be long in coming, but it does come at last ; or, if not, some other purpose is fulfilled which God intended all the while, though we never thought of it.

Out into the sunshine at last!—at last! The ivy reached the top of the wall; the wind blew over it and under it, and every leaf and every tiny spray spread itself out into the full light of heaven.

ere long abundant clusters of pale green blossoms burst forth from amidst the glistening, egg-shaped (617)

8

And

IVY LEAVES.

leaves; and myriads of bees came to sip the cups so brimful of honey, and to hum forth their thanks for the food they loved. And in course of time, when the summer was past and gone, and the flowers had vanished, the hungry birds drew near in their turn, to regale themselves on the dark purple berries provided for them just when other things had failed.

O well rewarded waiting-time to the ivy!-the long-looked-for consummation of all its hopes was bestowed at last. O blessed sunlight, bringing out latent powers and softening sharp edges, toning down asperities, perfecting the promise of a lifetime, putting the finishing touches to everything which would be dull and lustreless and incomplete without it.

“It was worth waiting for,” said the ivy, as it rejoiced in its usefulness and its beauty; “only, if it were to come over again, it would be well to wait more patiently!”

Ah, ivy leaves! something like this is the lesson to be learned amongst us, both young and old.

Little hearts—yes, and older hearts too-so often hot and hasty, impatient of difficulties, intolerant of delay, wanting everything your own way and at your own time, take the message sent to you. Be patient and wait. Yet is there but one secret of IVY LEAVES.

115

doing this.

There is no way of patient waiting for

any earthly good save that of which David speaks, and which he had so fully tested in his weary waiting-times: “Wait, I say, on the Lord” (Ps. xxvii. 14).

XXI.

The Long-Eared Owl.

Of all the owls, perhaps this is the one that looks the wisest. The feathers are set round the face in such a complete circle; the eyes are so large, full, and bright; and the so-called ears are bent forward, as if the creature were intent on listening to what you say. But, in

fact, these appendages are not real ears, but only make-believe ones. The true organs of hearing, which are indeed exceedingly acute and THE LONG-EARED OWL.

sensitive, are placed in the usual part of the head, with these tufts, or horns, as they are also called, over them.

This species is the one we are the most likely to fall in with, as it is the one that most frequently haunts the woods. In the deepest and most secluded spots, where vegetation grows rank and rampant below, and there are some large trees for shelter overhead, there we shall very probably find the long-eared owl. As it lives in the woods all the year round, it prefers the spruce or the pine to the usual deciduous forest trees; as it is fond of saving itself trouble when it can, it often takes up with the deserted nest of a crow, and uses it for its own family. The crow is a very early housekeeper, which gives time for the nest to be turned to account a second time in this way.

The eggs are pure white, and somewhat round in shape, generally six in number; and the young when hatched are the oddest little creatures, being covered with a close white down. It is four weeks before they get their feathers, so that they are longer in the nest than other birds. Even then they cannot fly, but have to be fed and tended for some time longer. The parents are very kind and watchful over them; and in some instances, when they have been carried from the nest, they have

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sought them out, brought them back in their claws, and deposited them in their old nursery, just as if they had never been away!

This species is also called the brown owl and the tawny owl. It is rather large; but most of the size of owls is comprised in their feathers, which are soft and loose on purpose that they may pass through the air silently. The young hares and rabbits, the mice and small vermin on which the owls feed, have as quick ears as the owls themselves ; so that had they the stiff, rustling feathers of the hawk and falcon tribe, they would always give the alarm, and would get very little chance of a dinner.

The eyes of the owl are fitted, like those of the cat, for catching the prey in the dark; so that they hide themselves away in corners during the light of day, and would rather not face the sunshine. The long-eared owl is not quite so addicted to the darkness as the others, and may often be seen in the twilight foraging for its supper.

Once, in the old Athenian times, a man, being pursued by his enemies, took refuge in a certain bush. An owl flew out of the wood, and perched on the bush, and so the pursuers thought it was quite clear that no human being could be there.

So the man escaped, and the owl was much respected after that, for having saved a human life. It is the THE LONG-EARED OWL.

only bird which has, so to speak, a countenance; and it looks so very knowing, we do not wonder the Athenians should have connected it with their goddess Minerva.

A certain naturalist was in the habit, when young, of spending his nights in the woods, that he might study the habits of nocturnal creatures of all kinds. One night he had lain down to take a nap in a hollow, when he heard a sound as of gentle singing; and looking about to see whence it came, he saw some little field-mice creeping round him.

He caught one of them, and tying one end of a string to its tail, and the other to his button-hole, he composed himself again to sleep. Presently he was awakened by most unearthly screams, and by a violent tugging at his coat, so that for the first moment he quite forgot where he was. As soon as he recollected himself, he pulled the string, but his mouse was gone; there was nothing left but a little bit of the skin of its tail. He looked overhead, and there, perched on a tree, he saw a long-eared owl, which had pounced down on the mouse in ignorance of the string, and hence arose the scuffle; but the owl conquered in the end. He had not been accustomed to any resistance on the part of a mouse, so that he might well be astonished. The naturalist aimed his gun at the marauder, but he was too

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quick to be shot; he just glided away, and was seen no more.

Another night the same naturalist was lying on the banks of a pool in the woods, listening to the croaking of the frogs. It was quite a chorus; the only defect, he tells us, was in the time, as each frog tried to get before his neighbour and pitch his music in a higher key. Suddenly there was a dead silence; every voice was hushed in a moment, as if by command. An owl had alighted on a wall close by. It had not made the slightest noise, and it sat there motionless; but the frogs knew by instinct the enemy was near, and so brought the performance to a hurried conclusion. The owl took its own

time, and meditated on the wall for half an hour; then it swooped down upon a luckless frog, and flew away with its spoil.*

The owl is a very lonely bird, or, rather, we should say, solitary. It does not follow because people choose solitude that they feel lonely, but rather the reverse. The owl evidently prefers its own company. Most of the species haunt the ruin and the desolate place; and as their aspect is weird and ghostly when flitting by in the twilight, and their cry peculiarly wild and melancholy, we do not * See the Life of “Thomas Edwards, the Scotch Naturalist,” by Samuel Smiles.

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wonder that all sorts of superstitious fears have been associated with them. But we may be allowed to look at the owl in the light of day and of common sense, and we desire to give it the credit its character deserves. It is eminently useful in clearing the world of vermin, doing for us in this respect what the sparrow does in reducing the caterpillars.

It does, no doubt, indulge in a young hare or pigeon now and then, but this deed of evil does not counter-balance its many deeds of good; and we may well assign the owl an important place, not only in the wood, but in the grand, vast universe of God.

SARGENT.sc

XXII.

The Sea-Gull.

CAN the bird of the sea have aught

to do with the woods? We sometimes

see it there; but wherefore comes it?

Has it grown weary of the restlessness

of the waves, and would it fain seek the green repose of the forest shade?

Such might be our feeling. "There is sorrow on the sea; it cannot be quiet" (Jer. xlix. 23); and we turn from it to the THE SEA-GULL.

solemn peace of the everlasting hills, or to the hush and the silence of the woods. But the sea-gull, as its long white wings flap, not over the moving waters but the solid earth, is probably not given to indulge in sentimental emotion. It goes where it can get food, and now and then it finds a change of diet pleasant. Fish, of course, is the principal item in its bill of fare; and fish it will follow anywhere.

Up the rivers and over the lakes it may be seen sailing; and it will haunt marshes and meres when not too far from the shore. If fish be scarce, it has no objection to other food; and a company of sea-gulls will follow the course of the plough just as the rooks do, and for the same reason, to feed upon the grubs brought to light by the upturning of the soil.

But the sea-gulls have a method in this plan of theirs, and a way of their own of telling time.

They always make their visits to land at high-water, and when there is nothing to be got upon the shore. However far they may be from it, they know when the tide has turned, and as the hour for low-water approaches, the superior attraction prevails; however delicious the inland meal, they rise in a body and depart, alighting shortly on the wet sands to pursue their researches there.

For how often so ever the sea-gull may resort to the land, the ocean is its home. It belongs to a 124

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different sphere of life, and was never meant for the woods. It has no song, it builds no nest, it owns no dependence in the remotest degree upon man or man's work.

But just as specially as the woodland birds is it adapted to the place it has to fill. All it needs is provided for it. There are the inaccessible cliffs, where it

may rear its young, and where no living hand can touch them. There are endless supplies of food in the depths below. There is boundless space, in which the strong, free wings can float and soar.

The ordinary species of sea-gull and several others associate in large flocks in the breeding-time. They occupy together the ledges of the cliffs, each species taking possession according to its kind, keeping “themselves to themselves,” and never interfering with their neighbours. This is the case on some parts of the coast; on others, they mix indiscriminately. Each bird lays one egg on the bare rock, without nest of any kind; and as all are alike, it is a marvel how each mother knows her own.

There is no need to make the nursery comfortable when the children never stay there. As soon as the young are hatched they are able to swim, though not to fly nor take care of themselves. How shall they descend, then, to the watery element perhaps hundreds of feet below them? The happy parents
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know how to solve the problem: the little ones are carried down by them on their backs, and placed on the sea, to return to the height above no more.

They are fed and guarded there till they are able to share in all the excitements of the full-grown sea-gull's life.

It is an interesting sight to see the myriads of those ocean birds which crowd together in May and June on all parts of our shores where the rocks are high enough for them to breed on. On the sides of Beachy Head, amongst other places, you may observe at that time rows of black dots one above the other, standing out like strata of flints which you sometimes notice in a white chalk cliff. These are the heads of sea-gulls sitting upon their eggs.

The

sound of your step upon the shingle disturbs one; then the whole assembly take fright, and take wing too, and you will not be likely to forget the hubbub, and the clamour, and the commotion that ensues as they circle round you in countless swarms. Presently the alarm subsides, and each bird returns to its own particular egg on the rocky ledge.

In the northern isles of Scotland, and the western ones of the Hebrides, the one means of subsistence possessed by the simple people is the sea-bird.

collect the eggs and the young is the one great To

business of their lives. They let themselves down 126

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by ropes, and hang midway between earth and heaven, or rather between land and sea, in the most dangerous position, holding on with one hand, while with the other they gather the eggs and put them in the basket which is tied round them for the purpose. The eggs are pickled for winter con-

sumption, as well as eaten fresh. The birds themselves are useful in various ways, but specially valued for the sake of the oil with which they are largely supplied, and which is to provide light for the islanders through the cold, dark, sunless days of winter.

The feathers they export, and exchange

for other articles of need. A well-seasoned rope is thus a most important possession, as it is the bread-winner, and represents the supply of all the frugal wants of the household. It will last for years, and it passes as an heirloom from father to son, and is often even given as a dowry upon a maiden's marriage.

The cry of the sea-gull harmonizes well with the dash of the waves and the solitude of the sea-shore.

The song of the nightingale would be out of place and unappreciated there; but the wild note and the hoarse scream seem part and parcel of the scene, without which it would not be complete. Nature has many strings to her harp, and some send forth a mournful sound. There must be a minor as well
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We

as a major chord to make up the melody.

believe that for every feeling which God has put into a human heart there is a response in nature.

If we will only take the trouble to seek her, and put ourselves in sympathy with her, she will have an answer ready according to our mood of mind, rejoicing with those that do rejoice, and we might almost say she can weep with those that weep.

She has the wail of the sea-bird, the sighing of the wind, the gurgle of the wave, as well as the song of the skylark and the flush of the summer flowers.

But she must be sought reverently. It is holy ground on which we tread, since that which we call nature is but the embodiment of the thoughts of God; the token of His continual presence; the stepping-stone which has led us, and would always lead us, if we willed, from the God of nature to the God of grace.

But “

””

the world is too much with us;’ we are

too careless and too pre-occupied; we are not still enough to listen: so the oracle refuses to speak, and the secrets remain untold.

XXIII.

The House in the Woods.

THERE is a certain inhabitant of the woods who lives in a tree and yet is not a bird; a restless, frisky creature, here, there, and everywhere; of most active habits and untiring, so that, although he has no wings, he can move from bough to bough, and even from tree to tree, with as much freedom as if he had them. His head seems brimful of plans and purposes, and he gives himself no rest till he has carried them out. I am afraid they are all for his own benefit, and of

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no good to anybody else.

Well, he has his own living

blame him for doing it in

to get, and we must not

earnest. It is all well as far as it goes, and anything is better than laziness. With all this activity, he is very shy, and of a suspicious temper. We have often wished to get near enough to have a little talk with him; but no, he has no intention of being sociable, and he is off like a shot the moment he becomes conscious of our approach, and vain were the attempt to overtake him.

He has a fancy that everybody wants to rob him, or kill him, or make him prisoner; and so he takes to living high up in a tree, and thinks he will be safer there for having been used to climbing ever since he was quite little, he can do it easily, and it is not a bit of trouble. He has built a house in the tree, too, all by himself, after his own pattern; for he could not find anybody else to do it to his mind.

And a very cosy house it is: the walls are thick, for he likes the cold kept out; there are no chinks nor crevices, for he is very particular about draughts; and the workmanship is good all throughout.

Nothing slurred over nor done in slovenly fashion; nor coarse materials put in places where they would not be seen. The builder acted on that excellent principle, "If a thing is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well."

(617)

THE HOUSE IN THE WOODS.

He had no workman under him: he was architect, carpenter, bricklayer, plasterer, painter, all in one; inside and outside it was all his own doing, and right well he did it.

But the house when finished was rather hot for the summer, it was so air-tight; so the builder set to work and made himself a second one, cooler and more airy; and so (luxurious gentleman that he is!) he has two abodes, like a town house and a country house. One is a nice summer parlour, where he can lie at his ease and feel the breeze blowing gently in; and if he is in meditative mood, he can watch the flickering of the leaves through the little slits which he has left for windows. The other is a snug winter house, where he can listen to the storm raging and never feel it, except that perhaps the house may shake a little when it is very rough.

Still he has no need to know much about wind and weather, for he has taken care to store up a large provision of the things he is likely to want, so he is not obliged to go out. He has got his pantry under cover, and, moreover, it is always full.

And he is so constituted, that though he takes a quantity of exercise all the summer, he keeps his health quite good in the winter when he does little else but eat and sleep.

Yes, this squirrel is a wonderful creature of the THE HOUSE IN THE WOODS.

woods, and worthy of being admired and studied.

Wild and shy as he is, we do sometimes catch a glimpse of him on our lawn; but before we have time to take a second look, up goes the bushy tail, and away scuds the owner thereof, in another minute seen at the very top of the nearest tree, and from thence with a few springs he returns speedily to his house in the woods.

Wherever there are nuts, there you are sure to find the squirrel too, for nuts are his great delight.

So people think that by giving him nuts enough they can make him happy, even when shut in a narrow cage, and doomed to spend the rest of his life in an open machine moving round and round in whirling fashion, as a sort of compensation for his beloved freedom in the woods.

A squirrel can be tamed, as the following anecdote proves.

Underneath a tree on the lawn of a

country house, where one was observed to come occasionally, a few nuts were placed. The squirrel took them, and then some more were placed a little nearer the house. He grew bolder and bolder, till at last he got to the window-sill, and then to the breakfast table within. From this it was but an easy step to take a nut from anybody who liked to give him one, and even to run up the legs of the master of the house, to receive a portion from him.

THE HOUSE IN THE WOODS.

And this is the timid creature which flies from the face of man! It is well to see what may be done by kindness even to one of these.

Likewise a squirrel can be the hero of a fable.

A mountain and a squirrel once had a quarrel.

How it happened that the great and the small came near enough to quarrel I do not know, but the fable says they did, and fables must be right. They came to words, and at last the mountain lost all patience, and called the squirrel a pert, conceited young fellow.

The squirrel felt himself getting

very hot, but with admirable self-control, he waited till he had cooled down, and then he remarked very quietly, "Well, if I am not as large as you, neither are you as small as I. Storm and sunshine make up a year; small things and great things make up

the world. It is true I cannot bear mountains on my back, but then-can you crack nuts?"

It was very sharp of the squirrel, and it shows he had some brains. And lest the mountain might have been too dense to see the meaning, I have no doubt that the squirrel gave a further explanation, that small things, and insignificant things, can do certain work which great ones cannot do, and that they can creep through little holes, where the giants have to stay outside.

The Crow.

1

WHEN people see a large black
bird, they are apt to call it a crow;
but, possibly, very few of them
could tell the difference between a
crow and a rook.

There are plenty of both even
now, as England is said to produce
more birds of this kind than any
other country; but in the old days the
crows were so abundant that the Parliament 134

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of Henry the Eighth, amidst all the pressure of business, and all the
distractions of Church and State, found time, and thought it necessary, to
make a law for their destruction. Every parish was to have its crow-net, and
the wisest people in it were to put their heads together, to devise means for
carrying out the enactment. In those less cleanly and worse regulated times
probably both the raven and the carrion crow found more to thrive upon.

The crow so much resembles the

raven in its nature and habits, it may almost be considered a smaller species.
But it is more general in its appetite, and confines itself less to animal food,
whether alive or dead.

When the crow has its family to feed, it is a dangerous neighbour to the farm-yard. It is very fond of young ducklings, and it is easier to get these than chickens; for the mother duck, instead of putting herself, as the hen will do, between the danger and her children, will only splash away through the pond, and leave them to their fate.

Mr. Waterton, the naturalist, once watched a crow carry off nine luckless little ducks, in succession, out of a brood of ten, just put upon the water. The crow took them, one by one, up to his nest in a tall fir-tree a hundred yards off.

It is a satisfaction to find that Mr. Waterton in-THE CROW.

terfered to save the tenth from the doom of the nine.

The crow generally chooses for its nest some tall tree near to the abodes of man.

Yet at other times

it is shy and wary, preferring to dwell in the woods, where it sits on the dead bough, or in some leafy nook, and utters its harsh, hoarse croak, heard but not seen. It makes its nest more compactly and more carefully than the rook, and never builds in company.

There are several important differences between the crow and the rook, and this is one of them : The rook belongs to a commonwealth, whereas the crow is only a single solitary individual, goes his own way, and is interfered with by nobody. He builds his nest where he likes, without consulting his neighbours.

In general habits, also, the rook is gregarious, which the crow is not. You may often see a pair, now and then four or five together; but this is the exception, and if you think you are watching a flock of crows, you may be quite sure they are rooks.

The plumage of the crow is also of a more glossy burnished black, except the edges of the wing feathers, which being more dingy make a kind of border. Its bill has not the bald bare place at the upper part which the rook's has, and which has been.

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provided for it on purpose, that it may be better able to dig it into the earth in search of grubs.

The crow will follow the plough the same as the rook does, for the sake of the larvæ, buried, as they thought, in the soil, but by this means disclosed to view. It will also feed upon worms, frogs, and insects of all kinds, will take a few walnuts from the walnut-trees, and has been caught stealing cherries. But in general the injury it does to man is confined to the poultry-yard. And quite enough, too, you will be inclined to think. Yet even for this the crow makes compensation; for he does us good service in removing garbage and decayed animal matter, and thus keeping the air healthy for us.

The crow is very early to rise, but not early to bed. The well-known “caw” is one of the first sounds to be heard in the stillness of the morning, and the last in the gathering twilight of the summer night. It is bold, hardy, independent, caring neither for heat nor cold. Perhaps there are few birds which claim less interest in our hearts. We cannot get up any sentiment about a crow; and even those to whom the birds are not birds, but “feathered friends,” find no particular link with the crow to call forth their sympathies.

The raven, though more repulsive in its habits, THE CROW.

being essentially a feeder on carrion, is much more intelligent and sagacious, and will submit to be a pet. It builds on such high trees as to be generally out of harm's way; and even that ogre, "the bird-nesting boy," can seldom reach the raven's nest.

But the young are so restless and eager for food, they often fall out of the nest—perhaps this is the allusion in the text, "He feedeth the young ravens that call upon Him" (Ps. cxlvii. 9)—and they have then been picked up, carried home, and easily tamed.

In captivity the raven is very amusing, but equally mischievous and provoking.

The same may be said of the jackdaw, another and smaller relation, and more frequently kept in yards and houses than the raven. It is such a lively, loquacious bird, even in its wild state. Unlike the crow, it prefers the company of man, and man's habitations, such as the barn, the castle, or the tower. If it be a ruin, he likes it better still; not because he moralizes, for that is the very farthest thing from his nature, but because the ivy makes such a nice shelter, and gives such convenient corners for the nursery.

There is another species, called the hooded crow, with very dark gray feathers, and a black head, which gives rise to its name. It is only a winter visitor in the south of England, but in the north

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and in the islands of Scotland, it is the representative of the family, the crow and the rook being almost unknown. It feeds a great deal on the shell-fish on the sea-shore. All the tribe have the same habit, but the hooded crow is more expert in his manner of proceeding. He takes up a crab or a whelk, carries it on high, then drops it, which breaks the shell, and he can then enjoy the contents.

Only sometimes he is circumvented; for another crow, seeing what is going on, hides himself behind a stone, and then hops out and seizes the morsel first.

But if the hooded crow wants a mussel, he knows they are fastened together in such clusters he could not disengage them, so he carries up a big stone and lets it fall, to smash them; and then again he gets his dinner. Or perhaps he fancies a limpet, and then he goes and inserts his bill between the limpet and the rock, to tear it off. But now and then a sad reverse and a bitter retribution come. The limpet presses down upon the bill, and holds it with such force that there is no escape; the prisoner struggles, but in vain; the tide rolls in-and that is the end of the too venturesome hooded crow.

XXV.

Birds of Prey.

POOR little goldfinches! flying for your
very lives; your feathers ruffled, your
hearts all a-flutter, your whole power
strained to the utmost limit, that you
may gain some safe retreat from the
cruel sparrow-hawk.

~N W

BIRDS OF PREY.

We would fain shelter you, we would gladly let you fly into our bosom and be at rest. Such is the terror inspired by this fierce pursuer amongst birds, that they forget their natural timidity and will flee anywhere if they can only escape. The dove has been known to seek refuge with man, and rush, as it were, into his very arms, when hotly chased by the dreaded sparrow-hawk.

We remember reading once how a little bird, pursued and panting, flew into a greenhouse for safety through an open window.

The sparrow-hawk attempted to follow, but in its eagerness missed the opening, dashed itself against the glass, and fell dead upon the spot with the force of the collision.

The sparrow-hawk is one of the most common and best known of the birds of prey. It is smaller than the other species, but it is remarkable that among all the tribe the female is considerably larger than the male. The usual law of Nature is reversed, the weaker vessel is in these instances the stronger; for not only does the female excel in size, but in strength and power. Nor is this all; for we are sorry to say, but it must be told of the female sparrow-hawk, that she has cannibal propensities!

Would you believe it? it has been found impossible to rear the two sexes together in the same cage, BIRDS OF PREY.

because the males are almost always devoured by the females.

So the fable of the Amazons is realized, and more than realized, in the case of the hawk family.

Happily for the male portion of the world, it is confined to them.

The sparrow-hawk does much damage in the

farm-yard and amongst the broods of young game.

It will carry off a chicken even under the eyes of a spectator, and bear it away in its talons for the young sparrow-hawks' dinner. If it spares not its own kind, it is no wonder that it has no mercy upon the little birds. It is supposed to be fond of sparrows, and to seek them even under the shelter of the houses where they resort; but it is by no means addicted to sparrows only. Its name gives colour to the fact, but that might well be extended to something more omnivorous and all-embracing.

The young of birds, or birds themselves, wherever it can get them, and by whatever means, it considers its lawful spoil.

Yet has the fierce sparrow-hawk its gentler moods, and it will come near to a house occasionally with no evil intent, and apparently with no hungry appetite.

One summer we watched a pair day after day which used to fly down and perch on the back of a 142

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garden-seat in the grounds of a country parsonage, within close view of the windows, and which always were quiet, self-possessed, and well-behaved during the time they remained there.

Another sparrow-hawk, of which we have read, would come every night to a bush just outside a drawing-room window while music was going on within. It seemed fascinated by the sweet sounds, and would remain there motionless till they ceased; then it would fly away, returning again the following evening. How the harmony soothed “the savage breast”—in what the mysterious influence consisted—we know not; but with birds, as with men, it would seem to be the case that ” none are all evil;” there is a soft place even in the heart of a sparrow-hawk.

We may doubtless say the same thing of another bird of prey, hardly fiercer, but larger and more powerful than even the lady representative of the sparrow-hawk.

The falcon, though it looks cruel and remorseless as it is about to fling itself on the trembling quarry, is intelligent and docile to man, being both tamable and teachable; so that it has been from the earliest times a valued favourite with him for the purposes of hawking.

The sport of falconry was, in the middle ages, a BIRDS OF PREY.

royal pastime.

‘A cast of hawks’

(that is, a couple) was considered a suitable present from one king to another; and the birds were trained with the greatest care, and treated with the utmost consideration. One or two special species were supposed most adapted to the sport, and were to be known by greater length of wing; which gave them, of course, power for more rapid and decisive flight. No other families but these “noble” ones were admitted and allowed. The merlin, a smaller hawk,

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was considered more fitting for ladies, but the peregrine falcon was the one most generally valued.

It is a graceful and finely-marked bird, and is still found in rocky and secluded places all over the country. It breeds on the cliffs of Great Orme's Head, and also on the Needles in the Isle of Wight, making wild havoc among the swarms of sea-gulls which resort to both these localities. In Scotland it is still more abundant, and it leads a luxurious life, one may suppose, in the wild mountain haunts of the grouse and the ptarmigan. Yet it does not always insist on seclusion. Occasionally one has taken up its residence in the tower of Westminster Abbey or the dome of St. Paul's, to the terror of the jackdaws and the pigeons which flock round these sacred precincts.

Once the strange sight was seen

of a plump pigeon pursued and brought down upon the pavement in Leicester Square by one of these peregrine falcons.

When the falcon is let loose on its prey, it will chase it with an inconceivable rapidity. A heron was in the olden time the bird most frequently chosen to be pursued, and the excitement to the spectators, when a hawking-party had gone forth, was to watch the two alternately rising one above another, it being the falcon's aim always to soar higher, and then, when within a few feet, to stretch out its powerful legs BIRDS OF PREY.

and claws, swoop down upon the victim, and bear it obliquely to the ground with overwhelming force.

The poor heron might struggle hard for life, but its chance would be small against so swift and determined a foe.

The art of falconry is of very early date; practised by the French and Germans first, and then introduced into England not later, certainly, than the Saxon King Ethelbert, for we find him in the year 960 writing to Germany for a brace of falcons, there being very few in Kent.

All through the middle ages it was the favourite amusement of the upper classes. When the kings and nobles were not at war, it was something of interest to fall back upon. When there were few books, and fewer still who could read them, it was a happy resource for filling up the time. For the falcons had to be trained, fed, and tended, and were therefore matters of constant consideration besides the actual days of the sport. Perhaps they afforded subjects of conversation, and that must surely have been worth something when ideas and thoughts were so limited.

Kings made presents of them, or bought them at a high price. The King of Scotland sent one to Edward the First as a propitiatory offering. James the First gave a thousand pounds for a cast of (617)

BIRDS OF PREY.

hawks; but after his time the sport seems to have declined. Reality became too intense for pastime, and the shifting scenes of life too engrossing. Sport was not after the fashion of Cromwell's mind, and falconry by degrees merged into a thing of the past.

And to us, now, it is one of the pictures of the past seen by our inward eye. We associate it with the romance of the olden times; it comes before us as part and parcel of the things gone by.

The falcon lives still, though it sits no more upon a royal wrist, with silver bells round its neck and a silken hood over its eyes. It fulfils its mission still in the woods and in the wilds; for as it is the weak and sickly ones amongst birds and animals which it especially attacks, by removing these it prevents the race from degenerating.

And

in that great Hereafter, when the evil beasts shall cease out of the land, doubtless the mission of all that destroy will have come to an end, and the birds of prey shall cease too.

WWYMPER

XXVI.

The Nether and the

Upper Springs.

Pour down upon us the abundance

of Thy mercy.”

THE wild swan had made its nest by the

water-side. It was just where a stream.

had expanded into a pool, still and quiet; very different from the rippling
and the

gurgling which were going on just on the

other side of the rock, which jutted across, 148

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and shut out from view the next reach of the river.

The wild swan had thought it a very commodious spot. There were tall
rushes standing up over it like a little forest, making it cool and shady,
while the bright blossoms of the yellow iris and the purple loose-strife were
as good as a flower-garden all round it. On one side there was a sloping
bank of ferns stretching away into the woods; on the other, some green
meadows, at least they were green once, you might suppose, but now, at this
time, they were almost the colour of mahogany.

-

And was it fancy, or was the water really getting day by day a little further from the swan's nest?

The swan used to plunge from his very door-step into the pool, and go off with a grand splash; but now he had to walk a little, and when he did get to the water, it was quite clear there was less of it.

For there had been many weeks without rain.

Everything was getting dry and withered, and matters began to look very serious to all living creatures that cared for moisture. The croak of the frogs sounded very doleful and piteous; and the woodpecker, whose cry is supposed to bring rain, was as silent in the woods as though there never was to be rain on the earth again.

The ferns began to look weak and flabby, and the forget-me-nots talked of shutting up their blue THE NETHER AND THE UPPER SPRINGS.

eyes to open them no more.

Every night the sun

went down without a cloud, and every morning rose again in fiery splendour without a sign of change of weather. The swan's eggs in the nest were hatched now, and the little gray cygnets stood upon the bank and looked about them.

"Oh dear! oh dear! how hot and dry it is,"

they cried, and they got restless and fidgety, as all young things do in warm weather. Of course they could swim; they can always do that the first thing, without any teaching; but the pool was so shallow now there was very little of it to swim in, and they could not use their wings yet to fly away anywhere else.

"I'm getting anxious," said the swan-mother, "for the pool will soon be dry, and then what will my young family do?"

The swan-father took a short flight to see how it fared with the stream a little beyond; but he came back more discouraged, saying that the stream itself was as near gone as could be. The middle of it was, indeed, nothing better than a bed of stones, and two tiny threads, one on each side under the bank, were all that was left of the once foaming, rushing water.

The pool itself was meanwhile getting smaller and smaller, showing more and more every day of 150

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the mud below,-it was a wide margin now, and a very insignificant centre.

"Just as I said," sighed the desponding mother; "all the water in the world has been used up, and there's no more to come.

That is what it is, depend

upon

it.”

“I will go and see,” answered her mate, after a pause for consideration; “I will take a longer flight, and explore for myself. If you are right, and there is no more water anywhere, I will return, and we will all die together.”

The prospect was not cheering, and the swan-mother was not the least hopeful as to the result.

With a sigh and a gasp she turned back again to her young ones, while the swan-father spread his long white wings, and began his voyage of discovery.

He was soon out of sight, although at first he only flew along the course of the stream a few yards from the ground. There was nothing to be seen but withered flowers and sunburnt pastures, and a hot haze over them; while the stream itself seemed as if all the spirit were gone out of it, and there was nothing left for it but just to drag out a weary existence to the last drop, and then to die.

But the wild swan was accustomed to higher flights than these. It had been its nature, in its THE NETHER AND THE UPPER SPRINGS.

annual migrations from the frozen North to the milder South, to soar in the fields of upper air, and so it would do the same now. Up, up, higher, higher, it began to rise; and as it rose its view grew wider, and the world grew larger. The hills began to rise too, at first in gentle slopes, then in steep ascents, at last in rocks and precipices. They were two or three thousand feet now above the level of the parched and burnt-up plain.

And was it the same here? was it all dry and arid? had the water vanished from the high places as well as from the low ones?

There was water

Not so. Oh, the difference!

everywhere: trickling down the rocks, bubbling up from the moss-bed, filtering through the bog, rippling round the stones—was it likely that the supply would ever cease? Nor was this all: the swan alighted upon a huge piece of rock, and from thence looked down with amazement, not on a gentle river, but on a cataract!—a mass of water pouring itself downwards towards the valley with overwhelming power, and in such lavish abundance, it was enough to take a thirsty swan's heart by surprise. Such a prodigal waste of water it seemed, and yet not one drop but had its mission to fulfil.

we are

“Oh, water, water!” cried the swan,

perishing with thirst below, can't you spare us just 152

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a little from all this store of yours, which nobody wants up here?”

“It is all meant for you,” roared the torrent as it hurried by; it had no time for more. And what more was there to say? There was enough for the swans, and for all living creatures besides ;-but oh! how hard it is for the world below to believe in the world above!

Oh the difference between the nether and the upper springs; between the paucity of what we have, and the fulness which we might have! Shall we not turn from the valley to the height? Shall we not look away from the thirst and the barrenness of the plain, and turn to the “hills from whence cometh our help”? The upper springs may well say, “Ye are not straitened in us, but in yourselves.”

And the swan flew back to his family and bade them be comforted, for there was water still left in the higher world, and the supply was inexhaustible.

XXVII.

A Bramble-Bush.

EVEN in the summer-time not to be
despised, though we do hold it as the
commonest of all common things; and
as it flings its thorny sprays across
our path in the woods, we thrust it
away in angry contempt that it should
dare to cling to our attire, or impede
our way.

Even in the summer not to be

despised; for the large blossoms, pale
pink, or purple, or purest white, have a

A BRAMBLE-BUSH.

beauty of their own, and if we saw them for the first time in a greenhouse, we should probably appreciate them greatly. As it is, because they belong to a bramble-bush, we never deign to give them a second glance. Anyhow the butterflies appreciate them, and that is better than being wholly neglected.

The bramble-bush cannot be supposed to be very sensitive in feeling; but to be loved by a butterfly is something, we should think. The swarms of butterflies always flitting about the bramble blossoms make a pleasant sight to the naturalist's eye. The two heath-butterflies, large and small, hover over them on their brown wings all the day long. They are not so bright in their colouring, so we pass them by, and look out for the next ones. The cabbage-butterfly does not confine itself to cabbages, but takes a turn in the woods, and pays visits to the bramble blossoms. The larger white butterfly comes too; and so does the green-veined one, which is worth following till it settles and gives you a sight of the beautiful tracery on its wings. Perhaps a fritillary or a ringlet, each with its starry eyes and its most delicate shades of brown, may rest here for a moment, and claim the admiration of all who have any eyes for loveliness.

Is there any object more lovely than a butterfly's wing? A bird's feathers are nothing to it.

That

A BRAMBLE-BUSH.

which we call dust on a butterfly's wing, is dust indeed to the naked eye, but seen under the micro-scope is composed of tiny scales, the size and shape different in each separate species, and fitting one over the other just as feathers do on a bird's wing.

A patient naturalist once counted four hundred thousand of these scales on the wing of a silkworm moth! More wonderful still, -he counted seventeen thousand lenses in a single butterfly's eye! We shall never get away from the butterflies if once we stop to think about them. But we want to look inside the bramble-bush as well as at the outside.

A blackcap has just flown out, so we know there must be a nest there, for it is his favourite spot. The cunning fellow takes for granted it is about the safest place anywhere; for even if you are sure the nest is there, to get at it is quite another matter. The array of thorns and the interlacing branches make such a formidable barrier, the boldest hand may well be intimidated. No doubt, in that sweet rippling song of his, the blackcap discourses of bramble-bushes, if we only understood.

But the young blackcaps grow up safely within the shelter, and they fly away at last.

And now

autumn has come. We know it by the thistle-down floating down this green alley in the wood, on each side of which the bramble-bushes live.

A BRAMBLE-BUSH.

We know it by the bramble-bush itself, covered all over as it is, not with white pearly blossoms, but with clusters of berries varying in colour from pale green to red, purple, and black.

We know it by the flush of crimson upon the bramble leaves; for on this lowly plant has been showered as much autumnal beauty as on the lofty trees rising over it, and so far above it that they do not even know of its existence.

Other creatures besides ourselves know that autumn has come. The feast is spread, and the birds come to it; not the blackcaps amongst them, for they are probably by this time far away from their old home in the bramble-bush; but there are plenty left who partake gladly of the banquet prepared for them.

Something is on the leaves besides the crimson colour; a winding, tortuous line, on one leaf here, and another there, attracts our attention. It is like a stream meandering through a green field, only that it leads nowhere. Yet it is neither aimless nor purposeless. A tiny insect, no bigger than the top of your pencil, even with its wings spread, laid its egg in the bramble-leaf, having pierced the exterior skin. After a while the egg turned into a grub, whose business in life it has been to eat away the interior substance of the leaf, leaving behind a narrow track to show the way it has travelled.

A BRAMBLE-BUSH.

Another species eats in the same fashion on the outside of the leaf. A third, instead of twisting about, ravages in a circle, leaving little round black specks, which look as if sparks had fallen on the leaf and burned it. A fourth does the same, but on a larger scale, making great ugly blotches, which perhaps are the most unsightly of all.

There are

We find them all on the bramble-bush.

several hundred species of insects, mostly moths and beetles, the larvæ of which feed in this manner on the leaves of trees. They are called “leaf-miners,” and they generally keep each to the particular tree whose leaves are most agreeable to its taste. Some turn into the chrysalis state, and then emerge into full life, on the same spot; others let themselves down from the leaf where they have lived,—a tiny silken thread is given them for the purpose,—and burrow in the ground for their intermediate condition.

It might be also on the bramble-bush, but more likely on the hawthorn, just above it, we might see something at this time like a mass of cobweb. Some dirty ugly-looking caterpillars are loitering about it.

This is the family home of the larvæ of the egger-moth. They are sociable, and live together by common consent, and all their movements are regulated, as it were, by clock-work, and most methodical 158

A BRAMBLE-BUSH.

arrangement. They pass out at certain hours to feed in regular single file procession, leave off eating at the same moment, and return in the same order.

When all are housed, one or two remain outside as sentinels till the meal-time comes again.

What a world of life is round us! What a host of tiny living creatures, each perfect in its kind, each fitted for its own little sphere, is before us, though we are looking at “only a bramble-bush.”

Surely, though it is such a lowly thing, it is not without its lessons. Surely the great Creator has left His footprints here in this green, quiet, secluded pathway through the woods!

XXVIII.

Water-Birds.

WITHOUT abating a hair's-breadth of our love for the singing birds, yet we confess a special liking for the water-birds. Perhaps it is because they are difficult of access, the reeds and rushes hiding them more effectually than the foliage, and the water forming a barrier not to be passed over. Perhaps it is because we so delight in the scenes amongst which they live. We may see the pretty black 160

WATER-BIRDS.

moor-hen scud across our lawn, if we happen to have a pond or small lake near our house, or we may watch it swimming quietly in some waste piece of water beside the railway on which we are rushing by at full speed; but mostly the water-birds are shy, and the spots they frequent are the wildest and the most secluded.

We come to some dark, gloomy-looking pool, in the middle of the woods; or we step out of their shadow at the farther side—a large lonely mere lies before us, covered with water-lilies, and a wide margin of marshy ground white with the cotton-grass spreading round it; or, best of all, we cross a stream, and stand upon the little bridge to look at the overhanging banks, and watch the swift current hurrying by ;—these places, and such as these, are the haunts of the water-birds. And they are haunts, too, of the Nature-loving human being.

Nowhere else is the blue of the forget-me-not so bright. The spiked loose-strife covers the banks with a flush of colour rich as that of the heather on the hills; and as we bend over the stream, we catch sight of that loveliest of all water-plants, the bog-bean. The light green leaves much resemble those of the bean, and hence its name; but the pale fringed flowers are unlike any others, as you will say when you find them.

WATER-BIRDS.

We return to the mere, and there we greet one of the largest of our water-birds, the coot. It is something like the moor-hen, only larger; and there is a broad white patch upon its face, which has a conspicuous appearance, and which is called in scientific language “the frontal space.”

The coot is about the size of a fowl, and like the fowl in its motherly ways;—it is in the habit of gathering its chickens under its wings at night.

And though it can swim and dive with ease, and is perfectly at home on the water, it often makes an excursion on the land, and is as fond of slugs as of water-insects and larvæ. It also goes to roost upon a tree.

So that the coot has to do three things rather antagonistic one to the other—to swim, to walk, and to perch; and its feet must, therefore, be peculiarly formed in order to combine the three purposes.

This is just what they are, and we might think them clumsy, and wonder why they were so made, if we did not know the bird’s manner of life.

There must be a web between the toes, or it could not swim; and yet it must have claws to clasp the stem; and must be able, also, to run through the grass with quickness and comfort. It has all been provided for, and the coot furnished for its daily need.

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Its nest is a mass of dried grass and sedge, raised above the water in some shallow part. It is large and untidy, but in reality compact and firm, as it is necessary it should be; for sometimes, when the stream rises, it is torn from its moorings, and has been seen floating down the current, with the faithful mother still sitting on her eggs.

The young are tiny black creatures, able to swim, but needing still the maternal care. The weasel has a liking for both eggs and little ones, and will pounce on them if left unguarded; but when the mother leaves the nest with eggs in it, she covers them with leaves during her absence, that they may escape its prying gaze. And after the young are hatched, she keeps a most vigilant eye on them, and is constantly on the watch lest they should stray away, and fall into the jaws of the enemy.

But yonder is another water-bird, and perhaps one still more interesting.

“A solitary bird,” says one naturalist in describing the heron.

“C

‘Solitary? no such thing; particularly sociable, I should say,’ replies another; and so the two naturalists are in danger of quarrelling.

But both are right, for the heron has two sides to its character: in one aspect it is moping and WATER-BIRDS.

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meditative; in the other, a member
of a large community, and living
on the best of terms with its neighbours.

It belongs to the wading family,
a family which get their living, not
by going after the fish, but by
waiting in the shallow waters till
the fish come to them.

And so

The
they have need of patience.
heron possesses the gift in large
measure. Behold it standing there
for a whole hour or more, its long
stilt-like legs half in the water, its
slender neck thrown back, so that
its head seems sunk upon its breast,
but nevertheless its keen eye de-

WATER-BIRDS.

the surface.

tects every movement in the fishy world beneath Should a bold fish approach too near,

it is transfixed in a moment by the sharp strong bill, and is swallowed without more ado.

Sometimes an eel may object, and show decided resistance. In that case, the heron will retire with it to the grass, and speedily reduce it to a state of submission and a proper condition for being swallowed.

The heron's general fishing time is before sunrise, or in the evening; and to see it at night, with the moonlight falling over it and streaming across the water, is highly picturesque. But it may often be The gray plumage is

watched likewise in the day.

softly shaded and mixed with black; and the long tuft of feathers which falls from the head over the back gives it an aristocratic appearance, of which, from the bird's stately bearing, you might suppose it fully conscious.

Like most other birds which live on fish, it has the power of feasting when food is to be had, and of fasting when it is not to be had; it will gorge itself to a wonderful extent; and then retire to some tall tree to digest at leisure. For the tall tree is a necessity to it, and there it roosts. But in the breeding season it makes its home there.

And now

we come to the sociable side of its character.

Like

WATER-BIRDS.

the rooks, the herons build their nests in company.

As many as eighty nests have been counted on one clump of trees; and where the herons have once taken up their abode nothing ever induces them to quit. If the trees are cut down, they will resort to others near them; and though, like the rooks, they abandon the nests when the young are old enough to leave the nursery, yet they return to them with the utmost regularity when the spring appears, patching them up and repairing them, and occupying the old homes with a new race.

A heronry is an interesting appendage to a park or enclosure; but it is not very common now. In the days when herons were valuable for sport, they were protected by parliaments and by laws; but now that there is no such royal shelter afforded them, they are much less abundant. The heron was also supposed to make such havoc among the fish, that war was waged against it, and it has been needlessly destroyed. Though it does consume a great many-catching as many fish in one hour as a good angler would do in three-yet it is not fair to lay evil deeds only to its account. Vermin of all kinds, frogs, efts, water-rats, are just as welcome to its omnivorous appetite; and these creatures would do more extensive harm to the fish in their early condition, than the heron itself would when they 166

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have come to maturity.

“Useful as well as orna—

mental,” we may add to our summary of the heron’s character.

When flying, the heron stretches its legs behind, after the manner of the stork; and its flight is very high in the air, and not graceful, being rather a succession of jerks than a continuous gliding motion.

It looks most imposing when it stands erect on its nest, or on the tree-top where it roosts in the woods, stretching its long neck and spreading its wings, and looking round the wide horizon ere it begins the forage for its morning's meal.

But we must not follow it to its station on the lake below, or, like the heron, we too shall grow mopish, melancholy, meditative, and shall give too much of our hearts to those haunts of the water-birds.

XXIX.

The Humming-Bird.

“

LOVELY gems as they are, humming-birds are capricious little creatures, and it is not always easy to say why they like one place better than another. They are the children of the New World.

Columbus gave us the humming-birds as well as the Amazon. The Old World knew them not, nor does it know them now save in a glass case.

They are found only in America and the adjacent islands; but although they swarm most in the Torrid Zone, they are

not confined to it. A few species visit

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the North in the summer, and one or two wander as far as the fifty-seventh degree of latitude, and do battle with an occasional snow-storm. The ruby-throated humming-bird, one of the loveliest, visits Canada in its annual migration. Some of the species remain all their lives within one narrow tract of country; some are found on one side of a mountain and not on the other, or go so far up its side, but no further. Some spend their days in those dense forests of Brazil, where, even at mid-day, the gloom of twilight reigns; and others cannot live without the sunshine, flashing across the traveller's path like a consolidated ray of that same sunlight.

There is one remarkable little bird of peculiar taste, which dwells in the crater of an extinct volcano in Mexico. It has a fiery patch, which gives it the name of flame-bearer; and it would seem, says the naturalist who describes it, as if it had caught the last spark from the volcano before it was ex-tinguished.

The humming-birds vary in size from that of a wren to a humble-bee; the smallest is only one inch and a quarter long, but the general characteristics are the same in all. They are formed for rapid flight, and for living on the wing. The skeleton of a humming-bird is very similar to that of the swift, and both are in their mechanism adapted for their

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manner of life.

They have each great length and

strength of pinion, and small delicate feet. The humming-bird seldom alights on a flower, but hovers over it while robbing it of its honey, the wings all the while vibrating to and fro with such extreme rapidity that the form of the little creature is lost, and the spectator can only see two filmy gray fans moving. Then it darts away like a flash of light, or like a broken bit of the rainbow come down to earth, sometimes to soar into the air and be out of sight in a second, at other times only to beat the air with its wings over another flower.

The humming sound which is thus produced has stamped the atom with the name of humming-bird in other languages besides our own. A gentle little twitter may sometimes also be heard from it, but it is so faint and weak it can hardly be dignified with the name of song. Yet has it perchance no need to sing. So gorgeous a being must express itself in colour, and not in sound. If, as philosophers tell us, there are corresponding lines of these two things, then, without doubt, must the humming-bird flash forth from its outward form the expression of love and joy which other birds put into their songs.

We must not suppose, however, that it is an ethereal creature, living only on nectar, and above 170

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the wants or the tempers of this working world.

Though it seeks the flowers for the honey, it likes the insects too. It is gifted with a very long tongue, which it uses in the same way as the woodpecker does. It is thrust down deep into the cup of the flower, and any minute insects which have ensconced themselves there, find themselves suddenly

transfixed and transferred to other quarters. When fed solely on sirup or sweet food, it has been found to pine and die for want of insects.

A gentleman in the land of humming-birds tells us how he domesticated a whole family. It was not a difficult matter, for they are by no means shy, but bold, trustful, and unsuspicious. After a fortnight, in which father, mother, and young ones had been in excellent condition, they began to droop.

He let them fly, but after flitting hither and thither, they returned to their cage, tempted by the sweet food placed there for them. They seemed much refreshed, and were quite well for another fourteen days, when again they grew listless, and after repeated experiments, he discovered that a continual diet of sweet things disagreed with them. He watched them when at liberty helping themselves freely to some tiny spiders, a dish of which he ever after provided for them, and found the scheme succeed.

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Another humming-bird which had dashed, or rather flashed, like a meteor into the room, he had secured with his hand; and though, when he peeped at it first, it pretended to be dead, it was soon tempted with some sugar and water; it sat upon his finger, and was as much at home in an hour as if it had been born and bred with him. After three weeks'

petting he let it loose, but it returned again, and the next season presented itself as before at the well-known window. So we see there are some loving traits in the humming-bird's tiny heart.

And lovely, indeed, are the tints on the humming-bird's outward form. All the most dazzling colours are heaped together upon the plumage, and there is a metallic brilliancy over the whole which makes it gleam like the sun itself.

There are three hundred species already known, and doubtless more to be discovered; some of fan-tastic shape and colour, and all most interesting.

The fiery topaz humming-bird, the one given in the illustration, is supposed by many to be the most beautiful of all. Its colour is a blazing scarlet; the head deep velvet black; and the throat emerald green, with a patch of crimson in the centre.

With some the tail is prolonged into a fork, with others it is spread out in rays like a star or a fan; one species has a bill like a sickle, which, no doubt,

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has been specially bestowed for insertion in some particular blossom. Although the humming-birds do occasionally hunt for insects on the wing, they prefer searching for them in the flowers in whose cups the honey is waiting for them; and thus they can eat and drink at the same table.

The shape of the bill is therefore very important, as it must fit the flowers; the humming-birds have accordingly been divided by naturalists into two classes, those which have straight bills, and those which have bent ones. So marvellously are the little hunters provided for their hunting field, and their hunting field prepared for them.

But humming-birds are not perfect; we have evil things to say of them. You would hardly think what stormy tempers are hidden under those metallic colours. If one happen to come to a flower and find neither insects nor honey in it,—it has been known to tear it to pieces in a paroxysm of rage.

If another humming-bird hover over the same blossom to which one is already devoting itself, the two will fight with desperate fury, both the tiny existences boiling over, as it were, with anger and excitement. Sometimes they will even dispute possession with a bee, and hard is the encounter between the insect and the bird. But the humming-birds are so brimful of life, energy, and spirit, !

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we must overlook the effervescence. It is not always so. When the little mother humming-bird is sitting on her eggs, she subsides into a very quiet and loving one, like ordinary bird-kind. The nest no bigger than half a walnut shell, the materials a soft, silky cotton, cemented with cobwebs, it is the loveliest of homes. If there are any fairies in the West Indian woods, they could ask no more fitting abode than the nest of the humming-bird, suppos-ing it had deserted it, or the humming-bird would surely fight the fairy!

XXX.

A Complaint from the Woods.

IT comes from the water-rat sitting on the grass beside the stream in the woods.

Do you hear it, water-lilies, as you

spread your fair white petals upon the surface of the water, and look up to the sky with that earnest, open gaze, which we,

with the eye of our soul, would fain do likewise?

Will you not pause to listen, dragon-fly, as you
A COMPLAINT FROM
THE WOODS.

flit by on these radiant wings of yours so lately unfolded, and with your large wondering eyes scanning the new strange world on which you have just been launched?

May-flies, cannot you stop for one moment your mazy dance, you who, like the dragon-fly, have come from the watery depths, and an ignoble existence there, to sport in the upper regions, and rejoice in the good gift of wings?

But none of these cared to sympathize with the poor water-rat. The water-lilies are much too busy, though they look so contemplative, for they have to give great attention to their golden stamens while the sunlight lasts, for sunshine is precious and time is short; and, besides, they are rather self-contained, and never turn their heads to inquire after their neighbours.

The dragon-fly is so intoxicated with the summer air, after the weight of water which has pressed round him for so long, and space, freedom, and flight are so delicious, he cannot possibly attend to anything else just now; and perhaps if we had been a grub in prison for three years, and then found ourselves suddenly transformed into a glorious creature with wings, we should have felt the same.

As to the May-flies, oh! they might well be excused, because, with almost the same previous expe-176

A COMPLAINT FROM THE WOODS.

rience as the dragon-fly, they have such a few brief moments to rejoice in their new-found light and liberty. There will not be one of them left by to-morrow, so life has to be enjoyed and its business has to be done to-day.

No, they have no time for sympathy; or perhaps, after all, it is because they do not understand.

They live in different worlds, and you know when people do that it is very difficult to put oneself in the place of another. You know how often we live

close together, yet at an infinite distance; side by side, yet with our tastes and our feelings and our real life never coming into contact.

So we will not be hard on the dragon-fly and the water-lilies for that which, perhaps, they cannot help, but will set down ourselves beside the water-rat and will listen to his complaint.

But how is this? Splash! and then down goes the water-rat to the bottom of the river. We know, however, that he cannot stay there, as he will want breath in a minute. There he is now on the opposite bank, and, with the water between us, he has no objection to a little conversation. We look at his bright eyes and his thick brown fur, and we cannot help thinking what a different creature he is from the rat we dislike so much in our houses and barns. We feel sure there is nothing objectionable

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THE WOODS.

here, and we determine henceforth we will call him what the natural history books do, the water-vole, and not the water-rat.

And after a talk with him, we

plaint for the benefit of others.

says:-

interpret his com—

This is what he

“I am not a rat, and I never was one. But because I happen to be of the Rodentia family, and because I have some resemblance to the ungainly creature who eats your cheese, dips his tail into your milk, sucks the eggs in the hen-house, and carries off the chickens, it is taken for granted that I am the same, only that I choose to live by the water instead of in the cellar. So you call me the water-rat, and per-secute me, hunt me, and kill me, whenever you can catch sight of me.

””

‘But my habits and my manner of life are utterly different, I assure you. I would scorn to do the things that are laid to my charge. Why, I never ate a chicken or a pigeon in all my days, nor did you ever find me in the farm-yard. My tastes are much more simple: I live on roots and herbs, and never drink anything but water. As I have never done anybody any harm, I might expect to be left unmolested; but, alas! my life is not safe a single moment, except when I am in my hole. I burrow in the bank, and make myself a retreat (617)

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there; and if only, by good fortune, I live through the summer, I shall go off to sleep there when the cold weather comes, and be out of the way of everybody.

“But at this season perils beset me at every step.

If I put my nose out of my hole, down comes a stone upon me, thrown by some youngster on the bank; if I sit on the grass in quiet meditation, up comes some yelping terrier, which has been sent to snap at me; if I take a stroll into the wood, I am sure to put my foot into a trap which the game-keeper has set for me.

But if they would only look at me, they

would see I am not really like a rat. I am much more like some American relations I have, called beavers. They are treated with great respect and consideration, so it is the more hard that I should be so snubbed and slighted.

“If they would only let me alone, and leave off calling me a rat, that is all I ask. The world is governed by names, I have been told, and if I were to get rid of this ugly association, there would be some chance then of better times, I know.”

We looked at each other a little while longer, and we pondered over what the water-vole had been saying. The dragon-fly darted by, and still never deigned to notice; the water-lilies were fast closing

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THE WOODS.

up now, for the sun was going down, and the flowers had to be very careful to fold the petals round the little germ within, so that it might get no harm from the water, beneath the surface of which they would sleep till the sun returned again to-morrow.

For when flowers close, it is not that

they are weary, as we are, and want to sleep, but that they may draw the cradle-curtains round the nursling, lest the night air should give it cold. And the May-flies were whirling hither and thither more giddily than before, so, of course, their thoughts were even less collected than they were an hour ago.

So we nodded to the water-vole, to assure him we would espouse his cause; and then we parted.

He scrambled down through the roots of the trees to his home in the bank, while we returned to our study to make the world acquainted with the very sensible remarks of the so-called water-rat.

XXXI.

The Larks in Winter.

WE can wander in the woods no more.

We are driven to the fields; but it is

little better there. All around us is

one wide waste of snow, except where

the hedges cross it with their

bare black lines.

The green

whispering corn, in which the

THE LARKS IN WINTER.

larks loved to hide, has been long since gathered into the garner. The turnip-tops, which were to them as a forest shade, have been cut off and eaten by the sheep, while their roots are stored for the same purpose in a heap at a corner of the field.

The poor larks can get nothing further out of them, and there is little comfort for them anywhere in the gray wintry sky and snow-covered earth.

They have betaken themselves together for the sake of warmth and company. But there is no safety in this; indeed, they had better remained as they were-in single pairs. For they have worse enemies than the frost and the snow. The snare of the fowler has marked them for destruction. Unfortunately for the larks, they are reckoned very good eating, and so the market must be supplied and London epicures fed. Such a vast number are killed in the winter time, it is a wonder they are not wholly destroyed. Yet, when the summer comes again, we do not notice any decrease.

The skylark lays five eggs and has two broods in the year; and though the nest is on the ground, and at the mercy of every passer-by, it is far less often discovered than that of birds which build on trees. Unless the lark itself proclaim its secret, and start up suddenly beneath your feet, you would

THE LARKS IN WINTER.

probably never find it out for yourself.

If the nest

did not escape detection, there would not be so many larks as there are.

Like all birds which

nestle on the ground, their colour partakes of the brown tint of the soil, and their eggs have the same character; so that in this way they escape observation. If the bright blue eggs of the hedge-sparrow were to occupy the

ground instead of the bush, there would soon be very few hedge-sparrows left around us.

The skylark never perches on a tree; it knows no intermediate link between the earth and the sky.

And the poet has told us it is in this respect-

“Type of the wise, who soar but never roam, True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home.”

Its claws are long and straight, fitted for running through the herbage, but unable to clasp the branch or the bough. When it sings, it ascends in a spiral figure, and not by jerks as other birds do. It springs up from its grassy nest very early, even before the first streak of dawn; for the lark, more than most of them, loves the sun, and so he will ever be the first to greet it. When the sun sinks down at eventide, the lark sinks too, and is heard no more. He is a very worshipper of the sun: the brightness inspires his song; and when that

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vanishes, the inspiration vanishes likewise.

skylark never sings after sunset.

“

The

The woodlark has a different taste. It is much less common than the skylark, and to a casual observer there is very little difference between them. But the habits of the two birds are totally distinct. The woodlark haunts the borders of the woods more than the open fields, and it sings from a bough as well as when poised in the air. It does not care to live only in the sunshine. There is a pensiveness about it, and a plaintiveness in its song which accords better with the twilight and the evening hour. The general character of its notes.

is the same as those of the skylark, but they are wild and sweet instead of being joyous and cheery; and long after sunset, even far into the night, the song may be heard.

If you have never heard it, you have a treat in store. To sit on the grass and watch the crimson clouds at sunset while the woodlark on the railing near pours out his evening hymn, the air fragrant with the new-mown hay, and the wild roses hanging over the hedge behind us in wild festoons, is a delicious summer pleasure, which, if once enjoyed, you will not soon forget.

But the winter is before us now, and the poor larks would come badly off if it were not for the

THE LARKS IN WINTER.

seeds which dropped down in the autumn, and which they now pick up in the furrows or under the hedges; for they are too shy to ask for your crumbs, and are not so fond of berries as other birds.

The woodlark gives expression to his feelings in a long-drawn, melancholy note. The skylark, if the sun will only shine, can generally keep his spirits up, and, if the weather be mild, will sing a cheerful song even in December or January..

When the frost is very severe-well, the flocks get smaller and smaller, but the fragments of them struggle on, and the seeds last out, we have no doubt, in proportion to the mouths that have to feed on them; for it was never intended that all the seeds, brought to perfection with so much care, should live again. They did not fail of their mission because, instead of sinking into the soil, they just lay on the surface, ready for the hungry birds to feed upon. Perhaps there is no such thing as failure. We may call it so; but if God's purpose be fulfilled, is not that enough? By-and-by the snow will melt away and the spring return. Then the woodlark will go back to the woods, and the skylark will mount up, and give thanks that his wants have been supplied, and that another winter is over.

THE LARKS IN WINTER.

“(

But, ah! for the present we must say adieu to the woods. “There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,” and that pleasure has been ours. There is society where none intrudes,” and such society we have had. What can people mean by feeling lonely, when the birds sing to them, and the flowers smile on them, and every leaf on the tree and every bit of moss underneath it has its own word to say and its own story to tell? How can they go to the woods and come back again, and not feel the holier and the better for it? We do not speak here of a mere natural religion. We know well Nature cannot teach truth; she can only reflect it.

We know well that life must be from within, and not from without, and that

“We receive but what we give,

And in our life alone doth nature live.”

But for that very reason, when revealed religion is once taken into the heart, then the wide realm of

Nature is laid under tribute, as it were, to feed and nourish that inner spiritual life. The mountains become the tokens of God’s abiding presence. The river-side is a place where prayer is wont to be made. In the depths of the woods we find a forest sanctuary, where we may hold communion with Him.

We are in league with the stones of the

THE LARKS IN WINTER.

field, and we have fellowship with the simplest objects, because He made them, and His Voice speaks through them. The universe is now one vast temple in which to worship Him, not only as the God of Nature, but as the God of Grace.

And alike from the far-off hills and from every bird and blossom of the woods comes the whisper of His love, and that whisper is-Peace: "Peace on earth, goodwill to men.'

"For this God is our God for ever and ever; He will be our Guide even unto death."

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